A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN
How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires
2
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An information war breaks out between the two young ladies...
“We need a new course of action. Let’s heavily push the propaganda to the people, not the nobles.”

Yuuka Kusunoki
Cosplay doctor and Rank A adventurer from the western archipelago. Her knowledge and clever power made her a perfect fit for this operation.
"Divine Artifact, Period"
Tida
Free-spirited sister unwittingly in the city near the dungeon. She was invited to join the expedition to fight undead monsters.
"Protect us from the wicked, Sanctuary!"
"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub."
Ellie Leis
Former noble lady who was betrayed by her homeland and has sworn to get revenge. She joins the dungeon expedition to recover the ancient Divine Artifacts of a terrible threat spreading in the Undead and to save her allies.
Elsa Archfield
Rank A adventurer whose title is bestowed under the Archfield clan. She was hired to clear the dungeon, due to her strength and great aura.
"Divine Artifact, Spada della Fenice."

“Alice, you must knock before entering a room.”
“Mama!”
The small girl with silky blonde hair barged into the room and jumped into my arms.
Alice
A mysterious girl who treats Ellie as if she were her mother.

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Prologue

The Kingdom of Haldoria boasted one of the richest and lengthiest histories of the Central Continent. Its royal castle, which had been erected roughly six hundred years ago after the relocation of the capital, had never fallen since and stood firmly at the heart of the kingdom.

After attending my classes at the academy, I started visiting this very castle every single day to receive princess lessons. Even though I had completed the curriculum a while ago, I still reported for duty every day under the pretense of "studying." There, I completed the work our lazy crown prince refused to take on even in the absence of a queen.

One day, while hurrying through the castle's corridors to attend a meeting, I encountered something peculiar.

"My lady, look..."

"Yes?" I said, following the line of sight of my waiting maid, Mireille.

My eyes landed on two silhouettes in the courtyard just below the window. A man and a woman were sitting on a bench, dangerously close to one another.

"That's His Highness," I said, recognizing the man immediately. "And that lady appears to be...the rumored Lady Sylvia, I believe."

From what I'd heard, Lady Sylvia Lockit was on *very* good terms with my fiancé, Prince Friede Haldoria, these days.

"Who is she?" Mireille asked.

"She's Baron Lockit's illegitimate daughter and one year younger than His Highness and me. Baron Lockit recently brought her back to his home, but she grew up as a commoner. She doesn't seem to know the proper distance to keep from the gentlemen. The most frivolous ones, including those easily affected by a lady's charms, have taken a liking to her. Well, I'm sure her lovely face must have played a part in that too. Anyhow, the serious gentlemen and the ladies dislike her. I haven't had the pleasure of making her acquaintance, but I've heard she was growing closer and closer to

His Highness. I shall invite her for tea shortly and advise her on the proper conduct expected from a lady such as herself. I'll also need to ask her whether she truly intends to become the prince's mistress."

"Why would you go out of your way to take care of the prince's mistress?" Although Mireille looked displeased, these things simply happened.

"I must fulfill my duty as a noble," I answered.

Ever since I started understanding the world around me, I'd lived for the prince and the kingdom. I'd never allowed myself to idle around like the other ladies or spend time admiring the gentlemen. As the future queen, I had to remain disciplined. My role was crystal clear, and I would carry it out.

"Considering Lady Sylvia's status, it'd be difficult for her to become the prince's second wife in any official capacity or have her children inherit a claim to the throne. It's not necessarily impossible, but her family does not have the power to support her. If a power struggle broke out, she wouldn't be able to protect her children or herself. She'd be miserable. I want her to know what she's getting into, at the very least."

While the castle appeared peaceful from the outside, the people who inhabited it were constantly at odds. Even as the daughter of this nation's most influential duke, I couldn't let my guard down at any time.

"Invite her to my salon tomorrow during break time. I'll make sure to warn her properly."

"Understood, my lady. I shall prepare accordingly," replied Mireille.

I nodded and hurried to get to the meeting room.

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The sky had just started brightening when I opened my eyes. Newsboys usually ran around town delivering the paper at this time.

"What an unpleasant dream," I whispered as I pushed my bangs, damp with sweat, aside.

There was no one to answer me.

Back then, Sylvia hadn't heeded my warning and had continued fooling around with Friede without a care in the world. I didn't

know who'd first come up with the phrase "Life doesn't always go as planned." But they were right. Well, I supposed it wasn't anything groundbreaking. For all I knew, it could have been a drunkard in some tavern.

I brought forth some water with my magic to wash off my sweat before dispersing the liquid. It was a trick that required a delicate touch and great control over one's mana, though it was incredibly handy—especially when camping. I wasn't currently on the road and could have taken a proper bath. Getting an attendant to prepare me a bath first thing in the morning was a waste of time, however.

Besides, I felt much more refreshed having cleaned myself. I got ready and checked my appearance in my full-length mirror. While I used to only wear the finest dresses, I now only wore my firm's uniform. Still, the fabric used was of top quality since I'd had the best tailor in the imperial capital make it for me, so it was just as good as my prior dresses.

I, Elizabeth Leiston, had been born in a ducal house of the Kingdom of Haldoria. As the fiancée of the crown prince, Friede Haldoria, I used to do my utmost to fulfill my duties as a noble lady. I'd given my all to my homeland and its people.

And yet, Friede had suddenly called off our engagement and had thrown me in jail. Even though my father—prime minister, Sieg Leiston—and King Bulat Haldoria heard what had happened to me, none had tried to help. The citizens had also started criticizing me, believing the groundless lies Friede fed them.

That was when I had finally decided to say farewell to my homeland. I'd taken my trustworthy waiting maid with me and fled to the Yutear Empire with the help of a viscount.

But I'd never intended to just run away. I'd sworn to take revenge on the man who'd discarded me, the country that had deserted me, and the people who'd betrayed me.

My bangs were a little messy, so I adjusted them with my hand.

To build up my influence, I'd started a business in the empire as Ellie Leis. Traitre, my firm, focused on high-quality cosmetics and toiletries. I exited my room at my current base of operations, a mansion in the imperial capital that doubled as my office and home.

Immediately, a woman wearing a neat maid uniform bowed to me.

“Good morning, Miss Ellie,” she greeted me.

“Good morning, Mireille,” I said.

Mireille, my waiting maid, had followed me to the empire. She was also the one who had convinced me to give up on the kingdom.

When she saw my hair, she took out a brush without a word and directed me to sit in front of a mirror before carefully getting to work.

I’d met Mireille a couple of months before entering the academy. On my way home after a courtesy visit to an orphanage, I’d passed in front of the slums and seen her alone, clutching her knees close to her chest. The discrepancy between the fine quality of her dress and the terrible state of it had intrigued me, and I’d started talking to her. I’d soon learned that she hailed from a noble family that had recently collapsed. She’d had nowhere to go, so I’d taken her home with me. Mireille only had a brief education but worked hard to make herself worthy of standing by my side. Despite losing her rank, she became my trusted confidant.

After a quick breakfast in Mireille’s company, I parted with her and headed to my office for a meeting with Arnaud, the capable butler who took care of my residence’s affairs. I barely finished any work when I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

Two girls entered and greeted me.

“Good morning, Lunoa, Misha.”

Though these girls were still young, I kept these two girls by my side, as they showed great promise.

Lunoa was the daughter of the man who currently ran Traitre in Lucas’s territory. She could use a unique spell, Item Analysis, and would surely grow into a wonderful merchant.

As for Misha, she was a catkin slave I’d bought in the capital. She was training to become my waiting maid and had recently started working as my secretary. I was considering freeing her and hiring her as an employee someday in the future.

Aside from those who’d followed me from my days in the kingdom, they were two of the few select people who knew the truth about my background and goals.

“You’re both accompanying me to the firm this afternoon, so make sure you’re ready,” I said.

“All right.”

“Understood!”

Mireille joined us in the cab that would take us to the firm that was in another district. To get there, we needed to go past the marketplace until we reached a street with several high-end stores. I would usually have asked the cab to take us all the way there but we had some time. Plus, I wanted to take a look at the current price of commodities and had them drop us off by the marketplace.

We stopped in front of a wheat shop, and I examined the produce on sale—large bags of wheat, barley, rye, and other such grains.

"Lunoa, what can you tell me about these products?" I asked.

"They're a little bit cheaper than they were last week," she answered.

"Exactly. But do you know why?"

"Hmm... Is it because of the conflict with the Kingdom of Sarjas?"

"Yes. Prices initially rose because of the war but stabilized once the conflict neared its end. What comes next?" I asked.

"Next?" repeated Lunoa.

She frowned, considering my question for a couple of minutes, yet she didn't have an answer for me.

"The status quo will remain for a few months. But after that, inflation is very likely to start up again. The price of foodstuffs, in particular, should increase substantially. Sarjas is now part of the empire, but we shouldn't forget that its main source of revenue is tourism. With barely any cultivated land, the area is far from being self-sufficient concerning food. Until now, they relied on the kingdom's imports, and the empire must assume that role. Regardless, there is no way the current production can easily meet the new demand, and this will lead to a sharp price hike," I explained, Lunoa nodding along. "But don't worry, the situation isn't so dire, and the government will regulate the market and supply to avoid famines."

I approached the shop owner to order ten large bags of wheat and asked him to deliver one to each orphanage in the capital on behalf of Traitre.

The Church of Ibris managed the orphanages but also held part of the judicial power. There was no harm in making sure we remained on good terms.

"Ellie."

I was sifting through the fruit and dried-goods stalls when someone called out to me. When I turned around, I saw a woman with hair as red as fire waving and walking up to me.

"Elsa," I greeted the Rank A adventurer.

Two of her party members, Marty the foxkin and Lisa the healer, were with her. I knew her and her party, Sharp Edge, from the conflict on the border.

"Fancy seeing you here," said Elsa. "You're out shopping?"

"Yes. I'm on my way to inspect my store and had a bit of free time."

I chatted with Elsa, Marty, and Lisa for a few minutes before bidding them goodbye and making my way to Traitre's store. It was a four-story building on a large avenue next to the noble district. It used to be a luxurious hotel, but I'd hired someone to remodel it.

As soon as I crossed through the doorway, the employees bowed to me and greeted me in unison, "Welcome, Miss Ellie."

"Hello, thank you for your work. Please bring this week's ledger to my office," I ordered.

"At once, miss."

All right, time to make some money.

◆

"Enough!"

King Bulat Haldoria's roar echoed in his office. The civil officials present made themselves small as they held their breath. The king didn't direct his anger at them but at his son, Prince Friede. But the young man couldn't conceal his annoyance and looked away, pouting.

"That's not a political measure! That's a fantasy!" the king screamed.

"Father! Aren't you tired of doing what your ministers tell you to? Leave things to me, and I'll show you I can increase our revenue!"

"Why can't you understand that what you're offering would only lead our people to their demise?! I keep telling you to get your proposals past Lady Roselia, but you never listen!"

"Women have no place in politics, especially not a haughty bit __"

"Silence! She's in charge because *you* had to act like a fool and

frame Elizabeth! The militarist faction Duke Fadgal heads has gained far too much influence!"

"That's all her faul—"

"If Roselia hadn't kept her father in check, this country would be at war already, Friede!"

The prince clicked his tongue.

"I've had enough of you! Go to your room!"

Friede clenched his teeth as he stormed out of the king's office. Being chastised by his father had irritated him to no end, and he headed straight to his office.

There sat Roselia Fadgal, the young lady who'd become his aide now that Elizabeth was out of the picture. Roselia, who wore a lavish red dress, did not bother looking away from the document she was working on even as Friede, the master of this office, walked in. She didn't greet him either, unnerving him further.

"Hey! What happened to my bill?!" shouted Friede.

"Your bill? I'm not sure what you're talking about," Roselia answered.

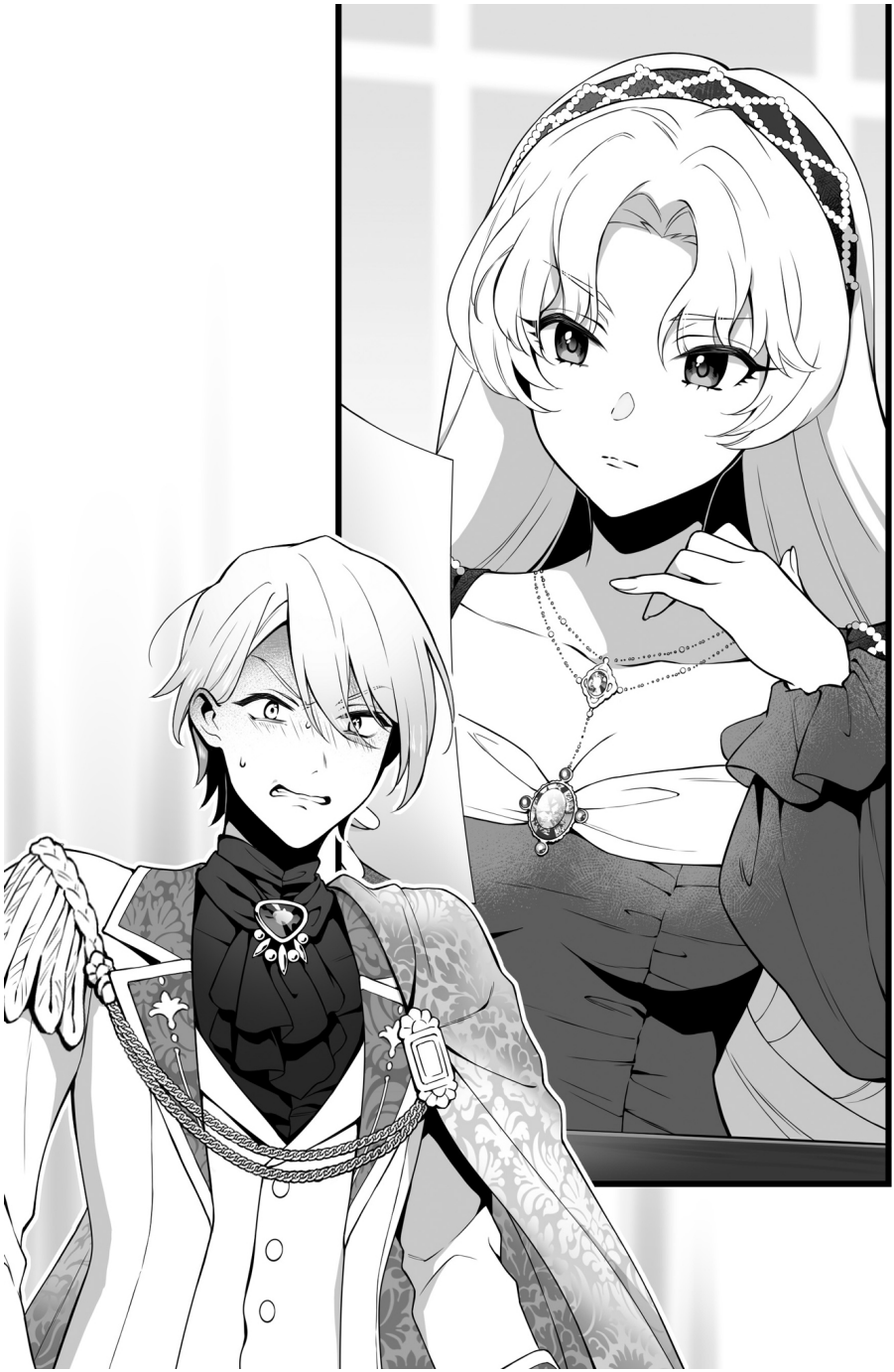
"The one I drafted and gave you this morning! I ordered you to pass it!"

Roselia finally lifted her head, looking at Friede with exasperation. One of her subordinates rushed in to fish out a piece of paper from a box labeled "Not Urgent" and handed it to her.

After taking a glance, she simply said, "Rejected."

She then proceeded to throw it into the tash.

"H-How dare you?! What's your problem with it?!" exclaimed Friede.



“I’m honestly confused as to how you thought something as stupid as raising the minimum wage by thirty percent out of the blue was a good idea,” said Roselia.

“Isn’t it obvious?! The plebeians will rejoice if they have more money! And if we pass that law instead of distributing handouts, we won’t have to waste a single coin!”

“But their employers will. I’d consider raising the minimum wage if the economic climate were good enough. Passing such a bill would make them lay off thousands of employees immediately. What will we do with them, then? If you finally got it through your skull, go back to playing with that shameless wench of yours. You’re wasting my time.”

“Tch!”

Unable to refute Roselia’s argument, Friede left the room, his face bright red.

That evening, Bulat gulped down alcohol in the comfort of his private quarters and sighed. His prime minister, Sieg, was sitting opposite him with a cup in hand.

“Our vassal states are growing more agitated every day,” the king said.

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Majesty. It’s all my fault,” replied Sieg.

“No, I’m the one who had the final say. I suppose that is what we get for letting Elizabeth deal with those things on her own for so long. That girl used to do all of Friede’s work, so it’s no wonder he can’t do much. Yet he doesn’t seem to have reflected on his mistake with Sarjas. I made Lady Roselia his aide, but she longs to go home already. I just wish we could bring Elizabeth back as soon as possible...”

“I have a few guesses as to where she may be, but I haven’t been able to send people, especially with everything that’s happened.”

At the moment, the Kingdom of Haldoria was hard at work to fix its relationship with its vassal states. They also had to deal with the fallout of the Robert incident. The citizens’ distrust and dissatisfaction toward the nobles grew, making it difficult to maintain public order. With all of these issues, looking for Elizabeth was far from being a priority.

“Your Majesty...” Sieg continued. “About His Highness, if I

may…”

“What’s wrong, Sieg? It’s not like you to hesitate. Go on, say what you want to say.”

“Well, this is not something I’d ever dare say as the prime minister… But I hope you can hear me out…as a friend.”

“All right…”

“I’ll be direct, then… The prince is no good. It’s too late, Bulat. If you leave this country to him, he’ll run it into the ground.”

Bulat remained silent.

“I know you expect great things from the boy, especially since he’s inherited the thunder magic of the royal family. But you are the king. You have a duty to your people and your country to make the right choice.”

“Are you sure…?”

“I am.”

“Must I really…make that choice now?”

“Yes. I’m afraid we’re running out of time.”

“I understand. I’ll send out a letter as soon as tomorrow.”

Sieg’s face relaxed somewhat, and after a pause, he said, “You made the right choice.”

Bulat and Sieg silently clinked their cups before downing them in a single gulp.

“So,” Bulat spoke up, “what news of the Kingdom of Sol?”

His expression had returned to that of a king, and Sieg followed suit.

“The insurrection has been quelled.”

“I see. We were lucky that it only affected a small area this time. If our relationships with our vassals keep deteriorating, we’ll soon be looking at a much bigger problem.”

“That is very likely, Your Majesty. Several countries have started stocking up on weapons and food.”

“What?!”

“They may not be preparing to riot, but they want to be ready in case a conflict breaks out between us and our vassals. The situation is quite tense overall.”

“Losing Ernest now was a huge blow,” lamented Bulat.

“It was. We could have called him back to the capital after a couple of months at the border. I never would have thought he’d take his life despite the guards…”

Bulat let out a deep sigh.

Chapter 1: Special License

I was in the townhouse of Lucas Lebrick, the nobleman who had come to my aid when I'd fled the Kingdom of Haldoria.

Two cups of coffee sat on the table that separated us. They'd long grown cold, but there were no maids in the room to replace them for us. Lucas had cleared the room so no one would overhear our sensitive conversation.

We had been discussing the conflict that had broken out a few months ago following the Sarjan attack on the empire, which my idiotic ex-fiancé had orchestrated.

The empire and the kingdom had been at odds for a very long time. Several years ago, both countries had signed an armistice, putting an end to a dreadful war that had caused extensive damage to them. That meant frontal military interventions were out of the question.

However, Friede's desperation for glory to stop his popularity from hitting rock bottom had led him to misguidedly use one of his nation's vassal states, the Kingdom of Sarjas, to start a proxy war. He had then joined the conflict himself, under the pretext of helping the Sarjan nation.

As a result, the Kingdom of Sarjas had met its demise. Friede had run back to the kingdom, tail between his legs, and his knight, Robert, had been executed after committing mass murder—the first step of my revenge.

"It seems like the kingdom is busy cleaning up after Robert Arty and concealing the death of his father, the former knight commander," said Lucas. "Their relationships with their other vassal states also became strained after they abandoned the Kingdom of Sarjas to its fate. They're trying their hardest to salvage what they can."

"I see," I responded. "You seem to have their situation entirely figured out. I should have expected as much of the empire's spies."

"You're one to speak. And you do know our intelligence operatives have become far more efficient after *you* fed them

confidential information, right?"

I laughed and smiled at Lucas.

"Good grief... Do you even know how puzzled I was when Robert disappeared out of the blue after we left Sarjas?" he continued.

"I apologize for my belated report."

"I wish you'd told me beforehand. After all, that was your plan from the start, was it not?"

"It was. The ability I used on him has its fair share of limitations, forcing me to keep him by my side for a set period of time before I could set my plan in motion."

"You truly are the one person I never want to face as an enemy."

"Don't worry. I promised to let you reap the benefits of Haldoria's downfall, did I not? I shall stay true to my word, Count Lucas."

The Yutear Empire had absorbed the Kingdom of Sarjas after defeating it, and it had later become a region. Half of it had fallen under the direct control of the emperor, but he'd offered the other half to Lucas as a reward for being the victor. Lucas had also been awarded a new peerage and had become a count.

As for the former king of the Kingdom of Sarjas, Grint Sarjas had become an administrator, still in charge of his nation under Lucas. Still, he held no real power anymore and was nothing but a figurehead. This was a tactic the empire often employed to smoothen transition periods and avoid riots. The emperor appointed officials who oversaw the new Sarjan region from behind the scenes.

Grint's younger sister now studied in the imperial capital—a cultural exchange in name only as she and her mother, who'd accompanied her, were hostages. He would have no choice but to remain Lucas's puppet for the rest of his life. At least he'd get to keep his life, which was already something.

"Anyway, allow me to get back to the main reason I called you here today," said Lucas with a strained smile. "Take these."

He handed me two letters. One bore the crest of the empire, and the other the crest of the Merchants' Guild.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Your reward."

I left Lucas's residence and boarded a carriage to return home with Mireille.

"What did the two of you discuss?" asked Mireille.

"Simply put, he gave me a letter of recommendation and a summons."

"A letter of recommendation...and a summons?"

"The empire's Merchants' Guild Council has summoned me. Once every few years, the seven merchants who control the empire's financial circles meet to discuss the economy. This very council will assemble soon, and they've called for me."

"But...why?"

"I'm assuming this letter of recommendation is the reason. I took part in the conflict because I wanted to do so. But the emperor officially sanctioned the volunteer army I assembled. Since we achieved great results, he couldn't afford not to reward me. The issue is that I fled the kingdom too recently for him to present me with a peerage or a medal. He must have pondered over my situation for a while and eventually settled on a Special License."

"A Special License?!" exclaimed Mireille.

The merchants who held Special Licenses enjoyed a wide array of benefits, such as the ability to purchase plots of land, receive loans from the empire, or possess limited items. Only twenty of them existed in the empire, and having such a license meant doubling, tripling, or even quadrupling your profits if you played your cards right. People with them were far more influential than your average puny noble.

But the government could not award Special Licenses all by itself. The only thing it could do was recommend merchants to the council. After an inspection, the council voted, and if the majority agreed, the merchant would finally receive the invaluable license.

"The issue will be this," I said, showing Mireille the letter that accompanied the summons.

It was a brief message requesting that I show the council my abilities. They hadn't written *how* they wanted me to demonstrate them. I assumed they wanted me to prove that I could contribute to the empire's economy should I be awarded a Special License.

"That is quite sudden. If I'm not mistaken, the council is to meet you," said Mireille.

"You're correct. I have a couple of business ideas already, but I'll need to make up my mind fast."

“Are you starting a new venture?”

“Yes. They’ve challenged me, so I must rise to the occasion and show them something new.”

“That makes sense,” she agreed. “We must make arrangements as fast as possible, then.”

I’d arrived at home and was busy working in my office when someone knocked.

“You can come in,” I said, my eyes still on the report.

“Excuse…me…” said Lunoa, panting.

She was carrying several large, heavy-looking boxes. Misha, who’d been classifying documents for me, rushed to her side and picked up a few boxes. Once they finished, Lunoa let out a relieved sigh.

“Miss Ellie, these boxes came from the people you sent to Sarjas.”

“What good timing,” I said, getting up and opening the boxes Lunoa had brought me.

I lined up their contents—the new materials sent by the employees stationed in Sarjas—on my desk. They’d found many things, from flowers and fruits to wood and monster fangs.

“Oh my, I remember seeing this flower somewhere,” I commented.

“Hmm… This flower is…” mumbled Lunoa, looking through the list of materials she’d gotten along with the boxes. “Ah! It’s a tarcs. These flowers grow in a specific area in the north of Sarjas. People cultivate and sell them but don’t do much more with them other than appreciate them for their beauty.”

“A tarcs, you said? Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Lucifer,” I chanted, gathering mana in my left hand until my grimoire appeared. “Search.”

My Grimoire of Lucifer stored and recorded everything I had heard or seen. I could also use it to decipher or translate anything I wanted. One of its abilities, Search, allowed me to look for matches with a particular keyword.

Fortunately, Search soon bore results.

“Found it,” I said. “The specificities of tarcs flowers are the same as those of the elumia flowers mentioned in ancient elven records.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the elven tribe that left this record had access to these flowers. They called them elumias and manufactured perfume from them.”

“Perfume?”

“Yes. The text I read was a travel journal written during the days of the Old Kingdom and preserved in the royal library of the Kingdom of Haldoria. According to it, the Artemi tribe lived in what is now the Sarjan region. In those days, this elven tribe manufactured a variety of high-quality perfumes using elumias.”

“You can make different perfumes from a single flower?”

“Well, the details and recipes don’t say otherwise. The elves would never share such a precious secret with a traveler.”

I used Search for a second time with the keyword “elumia.” This time, I found an essay written by a botanist from the Northern Continent as well as some notes written by an alchemist of the Old Kingdom.

“It would appear that the nature of elumias can change greatly depending on how you process them or the catalysts you use,” I elaborated.

“Their nature?” asked Lunoa.

“Yes. And from what I gather, ancient elves treated the perfumes they made like magic items.”

“You know so many things, Miss Ellie! I’m impressed!” Lunoa praised me.

“Well, the Grimoire of Lucifer records everything I’ve seen or heard even once. I used to have access to the Kingdom of Haldoria’s forbidden collection, and I can still access all of these ancient texts.”

“In other words, you’re carrying an entire country’s library in your pocket,” said Misha.

“Exactly.”

Misha’s metaphor was spot-on.

I wrote everything I’d learned on a piece of paper and handed it to Lunoa.

“Pass this along to the alchemists of the development team and tell them to try recreating elven perfume,” I instructed. “And let our people in Sarjas know that I want a large supply of tarcs flowers for research. They should also try to secure exclusivity on flower production. We’ll figure out how to increase it after our experiments yield results. Don’t worry about the budget; I will deal with that later.”

“Yes, miss. Will you present this perfume to the council?”

“That’s the idea,” I answered. “Lunoa, Misha, are you aware of the biggest issue that currently plagues the empire?”

“Hmm…” Misha pondered before answering. “I think I heard Miss Mireille talk about a flood in the west.”

“That is true, but can you think of another problem that concerns the entirety of the empire?”

Lunoa played with her braids as she considered my question before she made a suggestion. “The growing unemployment rate caused by the discovery of new and better materials?”

“Correct. Cheaper substitutes have surfaced, and the old materials lost all of their value practically overnight. The firms that handled these materials went bankrupt, leading to countless people losing their jobs and becoming a pressing social issue. By welcoming and bringing together every race and people that make up the empire and their expertise, they can achieve progress quickly. But that comes at a cost. Those who cannot keep up with progress are left behind,” I disclosed. “Good job, Lunoa.”

“I read about it in the newspaper the Merchants’ Guild publishes,” she said with a bashful smile.

“Ancient elven perfume has variations depending on the ingredients and process one uses. That means we can find a new use for the materials that lost value and invigorate declining industries. Naturally, that is not a be-all and end-all solution, but we can mitigate the issue somewhat. I would say that’s already an achievement.”

“In that case, research on this perfume should be our priority, right?”

“Exactly. There isn’t much time before the council assembles. Let us devote as many employees and as much budget as possible to this project.”

Thus, I had Traitre try to reproduce ancient elven perfume to prepare for my interview with the council.

◇

I made my way to the Merchants’ Guild, letter in hand. Someone showed me to a waiting room, and a man walked in shortly after.

“It’s been a while since I last had the pleasure to see you, Miss

Ellie," Cedric Luins greeted me.

He smiled and extended his hand to me. The slave merchant, known as the Educator, was a member of the council. I assumed he'd come to lead me to the meeting.

"Far too long, Mr. Cedric," I answered. "I never dreamed someone as important as you would welcome me yourself."

Cedric laughed heartily. "I was lucky enough to win the right to escort you, Miss Ellie. Thankfully, us being acquaintances gave me a head start."

"Why, I'm most pleased," I said with a little laugh.

On the surface, we appeared to be old friends overjoyed at the prospect of meeting once more. But I knew his true intention was something else—he most likely wanted to observe me. What had won me my ticket to this meeting wasn't a notorious achievement as a merchant but rather a military feat. I could see why he and the others would be wary of me.

"I've heard so much about your recent campaign," said Cedric. "They say you did not only lead the volunteer army into battle but also distinguished yourself with fine swordplay."

"I did what I had to do for peace to return to the empire and for my firm to thrive," I responded.

Cedric smiled and said, "Your production base was close to the conflict area, was it not?"

"Indeed. Thankfully, the damage was minimal."

"That's good to hear."

"But I must say this event opened my eyes. Hiring villagers isn't enough; I should have placed well-trained guards in the area. It wouldn't have suffered any damage at all, then."

"So you took this as a learning opportunity instead of simply being satisfied by your good fortune. You're quite diligent, Miss Ellie."

"You're overestimating me. That was just my inexperience showing. I hope to fix my shortcomings one day by learning from the best, Mr. Cedric. Naturally, that includes you."

Cedric and I kept chatting as we walked through the corridors of the Merchants' Guild. I dodged his prying as much as possible while ensuring I showed no hostility toward the council's members. I was here to start a mutually beneficial relationship.

Our back-and-forth only lasted a moment as we eventually reached a large door deep within the building. Delicate ornaments

decorated it.

"Oh my. Time sure flies when one is having a pleasant moment. Isn't that right, Miss Ellie?" said Cedric, opening the door. "After you."

Six men and women sat at a round table in the middle of the room. Including Cedric, the seven of them were the most influential merchants of the empire. They were the monsters who ruled over the nation's economic world.

The pressure I felt under their gazes reminded me of my time dealing with cunning aristocrats.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Ellie Leis of the Traitre Commercial Firm," I introduced myself, bowing politely.

"You may sit," said a man at the table.

"Thank you," I replied.

I sat on the chair closest to the entrance while Cedric sat to my right. A round table had no head, but the man sitting the farthest from the door exuded an overwhelming aura. I could tell *he* was the highest-profile individual here.

The slanted eyes and the scattered scales on his skin made me assume he was a dragonewt. In that case, he had to be the grand master of the Merchants' Guild: the Seer, Count Albert Guide.

Because the empire had emerged from the union of several races allying, there were plenty of demihuman noblemen. A large port in Albert's county allowed him to generate tremendous profits through futures trading and international commerce.

"Let us start, Miss Leis. As you already know, we are holding this meeting to decide whether we should bestow a Special License upon you."

"I'm aware."

"Well then, let us first go over your recommendation. His Majesty the Emperor wanted to reward you for your contribution during the conflict against the Kingdom of Sarjas. You assembled a volunteer army with your private funds, leading it into battle and achieving remarkable results," Albert read from his notes.

He then went over the structure of Traitre and the firm's achievements based on the documents I'd handed in ahead of time. The conversation soon moved on to Traitre's newest product.

I stood up and gave out perfume samples to everyone in the room.

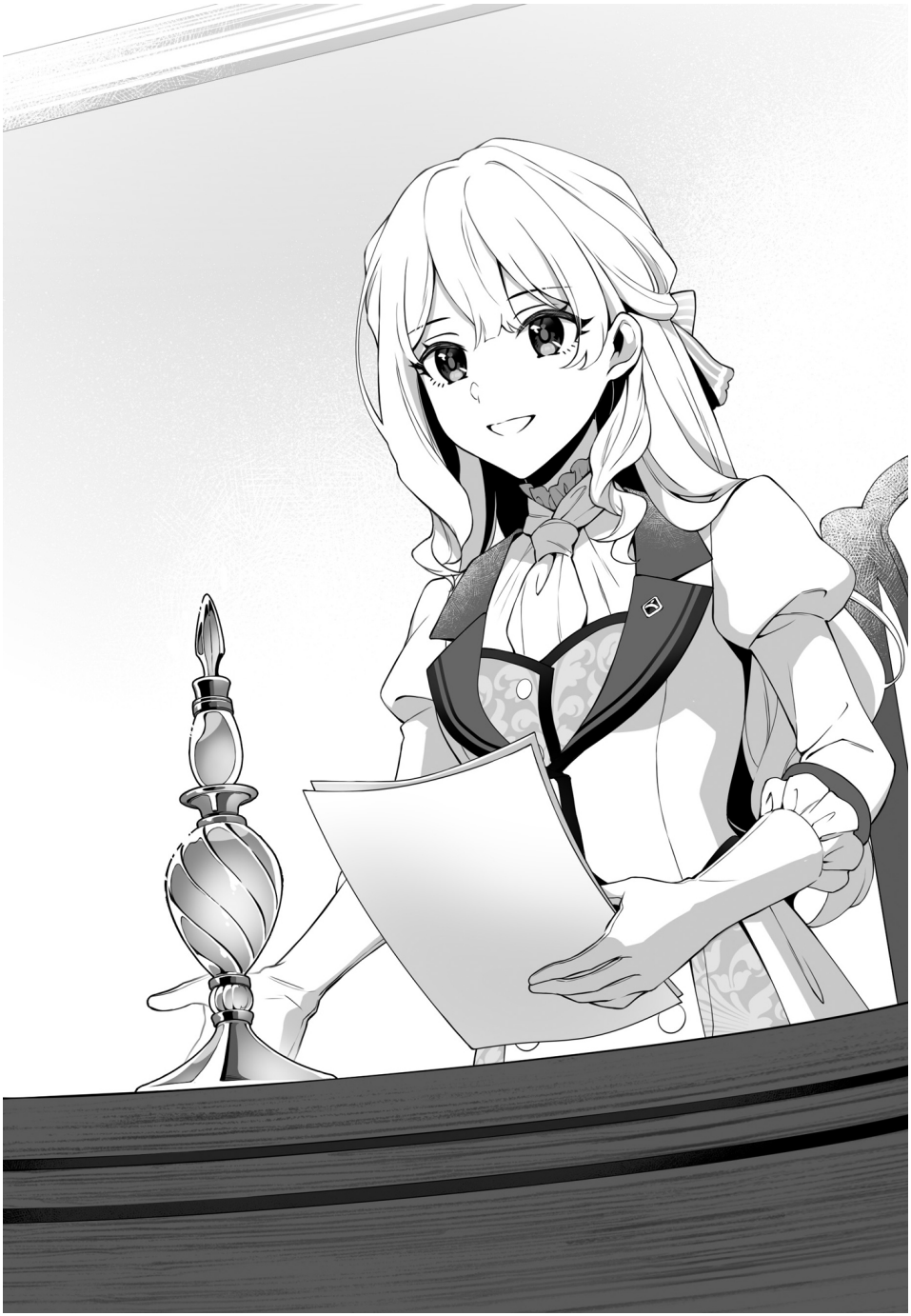
"Is that perfume?" one of them asked.

“Yes. This is a recreation of a perfume that ancient elves made. The tribe that manufactured it perished long ago, but the recipe endured. Such records, although few, allowed us to reproduce it. Do refer to these documents for the details.”

As I spoke, a guild employee distributed the documents.

“Interesting,” said Albert, nodding as he read through the pages.

“This perfume’s very nature can change depending on the refinement process. Not only can the fragrance change, but one can use it as a monster repellant or to protect the skin from the sun. My team has already tested these two uses,” I explained. “I would also like to point out a consequential benefit for the empire. The decline of certain branches of the industry has become a widespread issue, and I believe this perfume could be the key to revitalizing some of them. I’ve included an estimate of each branch’s profit based on the materials needed to produce, process, and distribute our perfume. You’ll also find an estimate of the impact on employment rate across the nation as well as a detailed study on the next page.”



“The positive impact on our nation’s economy is clear on paper. And if the figures you gave us are correct, the production costs will be fairly low.”

“That is true,” I confirmed.

“While it is perfectly understandable for a business to seek a monopoly over a market, a Special License holder must give some thought to the consequences and be considerate, don’t you think?”

“Naturally, I’ve taken this issue into account. Please have a look.”

I distributed another document, a written oath to uphold strict price limits for every item Traitre sold, not only the perfume.

“As you can see,” I continued, “I intend to establish minimum prices for every product we handle.”

“A good initiative. Luxury products ought to be marked up to avoid a price war.”

“Indeed. Our perfume’s price will be especially high. A lower price would have undoubtedly given us an edge and allowed us to take over this entire market, and I agree this is not a desirable outcome when considering the prosperity of the empire.”

Albert nodded. My answer seemed to have satisfied him.

“I believe your case is made,” he said before turning to the others. “Let us vote. Luins?”

“I’m in favor of awarding Miss Ellie a Special License. Her firm has already benefited the empire in many ways, and I’m sure she’ll keep working for the prosperity of the empire after obtaining it,” shared Cedric, displaying his trademark smile.

He insisted on my contribution to the empire but obviously indicated my activities would benefit him.

Albert nodded, then asked the woman to my left, “Callard, what do you say?”

The voluptuous demonkin woman wore a thin nightgown, and her horns decorated the top of her head like a tiara. The Silver Butterfly, Hilde Callard, had risen from a prostitute to the undisputed queen of the red-light districts.

“I’m also in favor,” said Hilde. “Traitre’s cosmetics are leagues above anything I’ve ever seen. My girls are very fond of them too. I’d love to see how far she can go.”

Just like Cedric, Hilde approved of me.

“Please wait,” a disgruntled voice suddenly said.

A man with his arms crossed was glaring at me. He wore a fine suit, but it wasn’t enough to dispel his rough atmosphere. Darc Hokins, the Chief, I assumed.

On the surface, he offered loans to nobles and big-shot merchants. Most of his profits, though, came from managing gambling dens and reselling stolen merchandise and restricted products. He controlled most black markets and dabbled in gray legal areas like nobody else. From a legal standpoint, he was a wrongdoer. Yet his overwhelming authority kept the underworld in check. As a result, the empire suffered less than its neighbors from drug-related issues and human trafficking. Darc was a necessary evil who had the authorities’ tacit approval.

“I’m against her having a Special License,” he said. “We can’t trust a Haldorian noble.”

No one seemed surprised by this sudden revelation. As expected, they all knew who I was.

“I also disapprove,” stated another voice.

The man who’d just spoken was an elf with a gentle smile known as Lotton Flywok, the Clairvoyant.

Lotton owned inns and hotels throughout the empire and other countries. Counting the ones the firms affiliated with him managed, he controlled over a thousand inns and hotels. He was undoubtedly the greatest inn tycoon in the nation. His information network was tremendous, as he could easily hear rumors from within and outside the country.

“Considering the Kingdom of Haldoria’s current situation, I doubt she’s a spy,” he continued. “But I believe it is still far too soon for us to trust her.”

“All right. Duly noted, Hokins, Flywok,” said Albert. “Kusunoki, what about you?”

The black-haired young woman he’d just addressed, Yuuka Kusunoki—the Dark—seemed absolutely uninterested in the conversation. Her focus was on the pastries she was busy gobbling down.

While many recognized her as the best doctor in the empire, Yuuka hailed from the eastern archipelago. She was so petite that she could easily be mistaken for a demihuman despite being a human. The people of her archipelago often had small builds. Most of them also had black hair and black eyes, just like the inhabitants

of the Southern Continent. In addition to being a doctor, Yuuka was a famous adventurer who often left running her shop to her apprentice.

"Pass," she said. "I joined the council under the condition that I wouldn't have to bother about this kind of thing."

The dwarf who sat beside her nodded. "I'm out, same as the Dark lass. Ye can handle the pesky bits yerself. Not me trouble."

Gaien Drafan, who'd just spoken, was known as the Divine Artisan because he was the best blacksmith in the empire. A single sword of his sold for as much as a mansion. He had the temperament of a true artisan and did not like trifles.

"Do you have anything to add, Miss Leis?" asked Albert.

"I'm well aware of my inexperience compared to all of you. However, I fully believe that I can bring comfort and happiness to many citizens of the empire," I said. "I also understand why my background may worry some of you, but I assure you it is not a cause for concern. I've washed my hands of my homeland. From now on, I intend to live as a merchant in this promising nation."

"Understood..." Albert trailed off, looking into my eyes. He seemed to be trying to ascertain whether I was telling the truth. After a brief pause, he scanned each of the council members. "I will support Miss Leis's application. Her contributions to the empire thus far are more than satisfactory. With her reputation in Haldoria, I don't believe we need to worry about her betraying the empire and siding with them instead. That's three votes in favor, two against, and two abstentions. Miss Ellie Leis, you're hereby granted a Special License. Hokins, Flywok, no objections?"

"None on my part," said Lotton. "I do think this is a little early, but I acknowledge her merit."

"I'll abide by the council's decision," replied Darc. "Though I'm still of the mind that putting our full trust in her would be foolish."

"You're perfectly right, Hokins," remarked Albert. "Traitre will be monitored even more closely than the businesses of the other Special License holders."

It was a reasonable conclusion. I was the daughter of a duke of the Kingdom of Haldoria, the empire's greatest enemy. I never expected them to unconditionally approve of me. A strict surveillance of my firm's activities was perfectly acceptable.

Still, I felt they had orchestrated this entire conversation and had decided beforehand. They were making it seem like they were

discussing my case in front of me and allowing me to make a case for myself. This meeting was all a play—or rather a warning—to make me understand that no one here trusted me entirely.

"That settles it. You'll receive your official license in a few days, Miss Leis."

"I'm most thankful. I swear to strive for the prosperity of the empire," I said.

"I have high expectations for you, Miss Leis. Well, that concludes this topic. You may leave."

"Goodbye."

I bowed and left the room. Upon doing so, I returned to the carriage, where Mireille was waiting, and exhaled. I hadn't gone through such a stressful meeting in so long that my body felt tense.

"Good work, miss. How did you find the council members?" asked Mireille.

"Worthy of their reputation. I can see why they reign over the financial world. They all exuded the most impressive auras," I responded.

"My. And what of the result?"

"I got their approval. Although they'll be monitoring me closely."

"Is that so? Well, I suppose it makes sense considering our background."

"Yes."

Leaving aside my motivations, I handled my business legitimately and per the rules. They could look all they wanted but would never find a thing. Mireille cued our driver, and the carriage started moving.

The next item on my schedule was to train Lunoa and Misha.

"Ha! Yah!"

"That's not it. Your second swing is too large. Keep your movements compact," I instructed, parrying Lunoa's long pole with a wooden sword.

"Got it!"

We were in the training area I'd built in the garden of my residence. I checked on Misha from the corner of my eye. She was in the middle of a mock battle with Mireille.

I refocused my attention on Lunoa. The pole she was using was taller than her. Unlike Misha, who had some previous training and

knew how to handle her short sword, Lunoa was a beginner. The first step was to let her pick an appropriate weapon. She'd be mostly fighting with magic, so her best options were canes, staffs, and long poles. For the time being, I'd told her to pick the one she felt the most comfortable holding.

"Yah!"

Lunoa thrust her pole at me but I dodged by rotating my body slightly. I then sneaked my wooden sword under her weapon and flicked my wrist up, sending it flying. With the same motion, I tapped her head lightly.

"Huh?!" she exclaimed, surprised.

"If you get your weapon taken away, prepare to dodge."

She pressed the top of her head, tears forming in her eyes. Misha had fainted after being hurled back by Mireille, so I ended the training.

"Ugh... Miss Ellie, is all this really necessary?" asked Lunoa while using the spell she'd just learned, Healing Wind, on herself and Misha.

Lunoa had an affinity for wind magic, which was why it was the very first spell I'd taught her. Light attribute healing spells were by far the most powerful and practical, although they weren't the only ones. One could use water magic for detoxification spells, fire magic could boost immunity, and other spells linked to each element existed. Wind attribute healing spells were interesting because they could achieve an area of effect and heal several more, including distant targets. All in all, wind magic had the second-best healing spells after light magic.

I answered Lunoa while checking the efficiency of her spell, "Of course. You cannot become a first-rate merchant without knowing how to defend yourself."

"Really?!"

"That is true of every field, Lunoa. Those who reach the top all have enemies. The world isn't kind enough to leave those who stand out alone. Misha, Lunoa, you two must be strong enough to protect yourselves from brigands and thugs. No matter how many guards you have, the only person who can defend your life is yourself."

"G-Got it!"

"I understand, Miss Ellie!"

◇

“Misha. What do I have planned for this afternoon?”

The catkin opened her favorite notebook and said, “You have to visit the workshop in two hours to inspect the new nail polish. Then you’ll head to Count Hammitt’s townhouse for negotiations.”

Mireille used to manage my schedule, but Misha had started taking over her duties. This change left more time on Mireille’s hands for her to manage the residence with Arnaud or coordinate work at the firm.

“All right,” I answered. “I’ll leave the carriage preparations to you. Research what sort of vehicle Count Hammitt uses and go for one that is slightly less good.”

“Understood, miss.”

I watched Misha step out of my office to deal with the matter of the carriage before calling for Lunoa. There were still a few hours left before we had to negotiate with that nobleman, and she looked tense already. Although she’d accompanied me on such meetings several times, she usually stood behind me quietly or waited in another room while I conducted those deals. This time, I wanted her to sit at the table with us. I wasn’t asking her to negotiate yet, as this was a big step compared to before.

“Try to relax, Lunoa.”

“B-But… We’re going to negotiate with a noble!”

I patted her head gently and got her to drink some of the sweetened tea I had prepared. According to Mireille, this particular blend was supposed to ease the nerves.

“Don’t worry,” I said softly. “You’ll get used to these things, eventually. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. You have what it takes to become a wonderful merchant, Lunoa. All you need is to get used to handling nobles.”

I meant every word. While I’d initially tried to bring Lunoa to my side because I couldn’t pass up her unique spell, the girl was promising. She absorbed everything I taught her about business or magic at an impressive rate. Her martial arts skills were lacking, yet she worked hard to make up for it. Despite her being a little shy, she was still an outstanding apprentice.

I told her all that to help her build her confidence while remembering to be careful with my words. Lunoa was the type to falter under the weight of others’ expectations, and I didn’t want it to backfire.

She eventually calmed down, allowing me to prepare for my

upcoming inspection.

The two main points I wanted to check were the nail polish's color and texture. To do so, I painted Mireille's and Lunoa's nails. I tried to do the same with Misha until her hair suddenly stood on end while her ears flopped.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I-I'm sorry... It's just...th-the smell... It's too much..."

The smell was pleasant and rather subtle, but Misha's nose was even more sensitive than most. Apparently, the odor was hard to bear.

"I don't have a problem with others using scented cosmetics or perfume. It's just that I can't use them myself..." she explained.

"This seems to be a little tough on beastkin noses," I noted.

"I-I'm really sorry," Misha apologized again.

I closed the little nail polish bottle, then gently tapped the top of Misha's head.

"Don't apologize. I'm thankful you pointed this out."

"Huh?"

"You helped us discover we had not adapted this product to beastkin. That's very helpful, Misha. Never hesitate to be honest when asked to review a product."

"O-Okay!"

"Come to think of it, I believe we have very few beastkin customers," pointed out Lunoa.

She was talking about the clientele of our shop, which targeted wealthy commoners.

I put my hand on my chin and contemplated this statement before asking, "Mireille, can you show me our transaction history for the last few months?"

"Please wait a moment," said Mireille. She dug through the pile of documents she'd brought and took out a ledger.

"Indeed, we barely sell anything to beastkin commoners," I said, looking through the pages.

"The nobles purchase our products and seem to focus on natural cosmetics," said Mireille.

"Even with high-end products, a majority of our customers are human nobles, not beastkin nobles. Practically all nobles were humans in the Kingdom of Haldoria, so I completely missed this discrepancy. Mireille, do you know the percentage of beastkin

nobles in the empire?"

"We'll need to return home for me to get you the exact figure, though I believe it should be around twenty percent."

"So that means we're only targeting around eighty percent of the nobility," said Lunoa.

"That's not what you ought to take away from this," I told her.

"What do you mean?"

"What matters isn't that we're only selling to eighty percent of the nobles. It's that there's an untapped market that makes up twenty percent of the noble population. Imagine how much we'll profit if we create a product they'll like."

That wasn't all. Beastkin populated several of Haldoria's vassal countries. The kingdom's nobles had no respect for these people they considered savages. There was one thing no one could ignore, though: beastmen had incredible physical abilities and could turn the tides of a war. At the moment, I had no cards to play to destabilize their relationship with the kingdom. If I could develop these cosmetics, they might play a role.

"Bring me a sample of all the nail polishes we're developing," I ordered an employee standing in a corner of the room.

"At once."

I arranged them all on a table in front of Misha.

"Can you separate those you could tolerate from those you hate?" I asked.

"Yes, miss."

She opened the small bottles one by one. At times, the smell made her brows twitch, but she continued to order the bottles.

"I'm done," she said eventually.

"Thank you. So it's these three, huh?"

"All three come from natural ingredients that have barely been altered," said Mireille, reading the notes she'd gotten from the researchers.

"I'm not sure I understand," added Lunoa, picking up one of the three bottles. "This one smells stronger than the ones you rejected, Misha."

That one had come about using a very fragrant variety of flowers.

"You're right, but it's hard to explain. My issue isn't that they smell strong. It's more about…compatibility," said Misha. "Beastkin can usually ignore the smells we're used to. That's why we don't

mind others' perfumes or the smells we encounter daily. But it becomes difficult to ignore when we wear them on ourselves for a long time and feel sick."

"Even if it's bearable, being surrounded by an unpleasant smell for long stretches of time is stressful," I said.

"Exactly."

"That means we must research ingredients that beastkin won't dislike even if they have to smell them continuously for several hours. Mireille, please put together a team of beastkin employees. It should comprise as many races as possible. They'll work on developing a line of products suitable for them."

"Understood."

Mireille wrote a list of names and called the one responsible for the workshop. She informed him of our new project, and we ended today's inspection.

After I returned to the residence and took a short break, I prepared to meet with Count Hammitt. My financial power was already on par with his, but I had to confirm our outfits were appropriate. Dressing too intricately or too simply would appear rude. I picked out Lunoa's and Misha's clothes while double-checking the present I'd gotten for him.

The carriage Misha had ordered arrived, so we left. It was of fine quality without being extravagant.

In no time, we reached the noble district. Count Hammitt's townhouse came into view as we moved slowly over the fine pavement. Misha, who was driving, pulled on the reins and stopped the vehicle. She showed the gatekeeper the count's invitation and our identification papers, then he opened the gates. While the townhouse was small considering his rank, he was very involved in managing his territory. As such, he barely visited the capital except during the social season and wasn't there much.

We left the carriage in Misha and the servants' care, then followed one of them into the mansion.

Lunoa and I arrived at a drawing room. Based on the size of the mansion and the appearance of the room, I estimated that this was his best room to welcome guests of a lesser status than him. The drawing room above us was likely to entertain those who were nobler than him.

"I'm terribly sorry, but an emergency has delayed my master. Would you be so kind as to wait here?" asked the valet.

“Of course, it’s no problem,” I answered.

“Thank you for your understanding. We shall bring refreshments shortly, so please take a seat.”

As the valet bowed respectfully, a maid soon walked in. She was pushing a tea cart with a tea set accompanied by an assortment of cookies, sandwiches, and other snacks. Lunoa and I were sitting on the sofa, and she placed a cup and plate in front of each of us.

The valet and the maid then told us to call for them should we need anything and left. Lunoa and I were alone in the room.

I tasted the black tea I’d requested and ate one of the small sandwiches. But I glanced to my side and saw Lunoa frozen in place, a stiff smile on her lips. She’d acted like that too when I’d taken her to a tea party so she could build her network. Interacting with nobles was still a source of stress for her.

“Have some, Lunoa,” I said.

“N-No way… I’m too stressed…” stammered Lunoa.

“Still, you must partake. That is how the nobles of the empire proceed with merchants they’re meeting for the first time.”

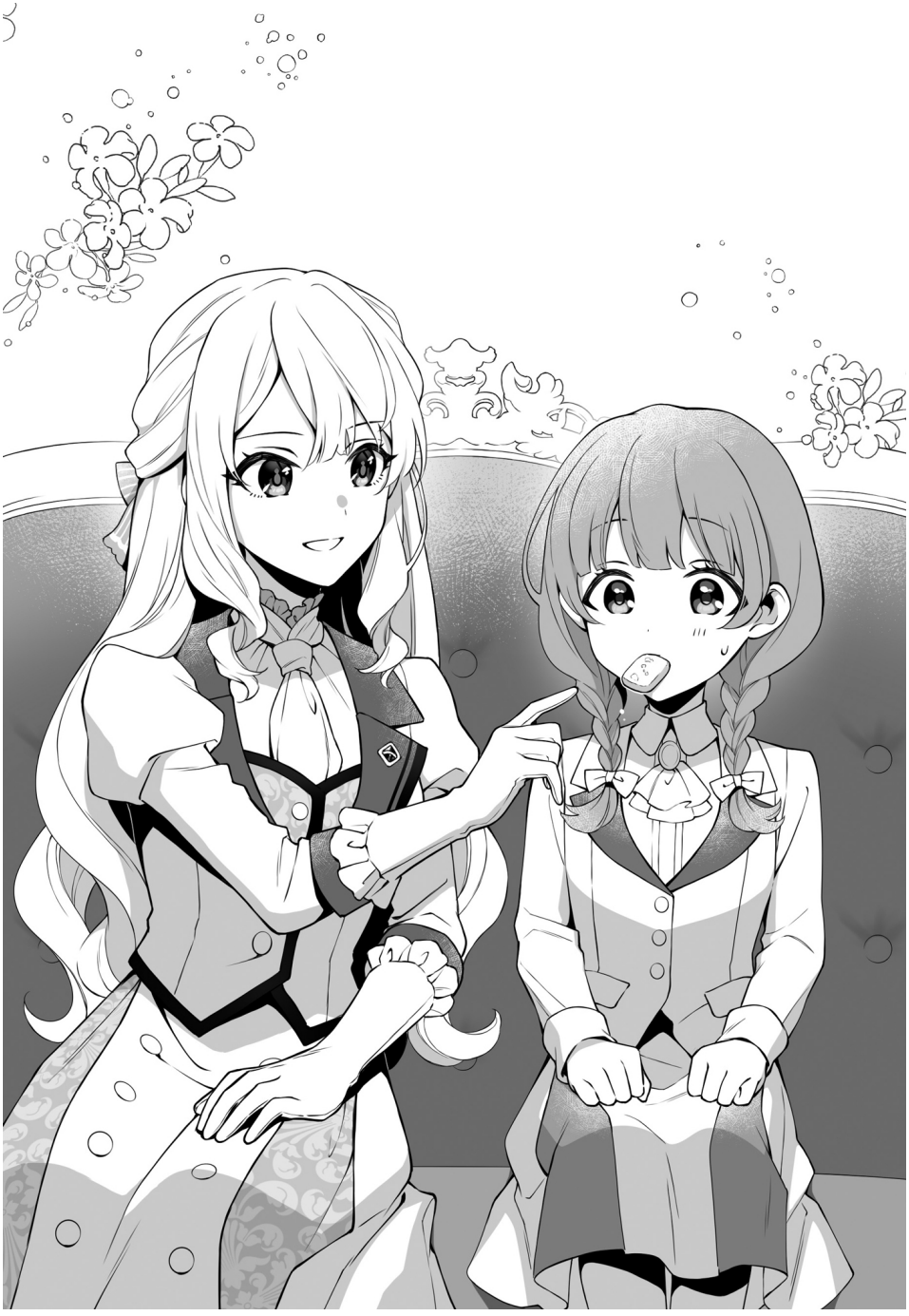
“Huh? But that servant said that Count Hammitt was busy with an emergency…”

“I doubt it. He’s making us wait to subtly display his superiority. Besides, it is an unspoken rule that one must have a taste when one is offered refreshments. As a merchant, you must demonstrate that you do not doubt his goodwill.”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yes. Although I suppose this is nothing more than a show of courtesy nowadays.”

I picked up a cookie and stuffed it into Lunoa’s mouth.



We killed time by eating and chatting for a little longer until a knock echoed. The valet opened the door and announced that the count was ready to join us. As soon as the maid entered, cleared the table, and exited, Count Hammitt walked in.

Lunoa and I stood up and bowed.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Count Hammitt. I'm Ellie Leis, chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm."

"A-And I'm Lunoa Carlton."

The count signaled that it was all right for us to sit, and we took our places on the sofa again.

"I'm Arzeus Hammitt, the head of House Hammitt. I've heard so much about Traitre. I'm delighted to finally meet you," he said, extending his hand.

I shook back and said, "The pleasure is all mine. It's an honor to meet a lord as loved by his people as you are. I hope we'll enjoy a long friendship."

"I share this feeling, Miss Ellie. I'd love to count a Special License holder like yourself among my friends."

Hammitt County wasn't close to the capital and had a large port. The count held trade routes toward several countries, including some on other continents, so I hoped to build a good relationship with him.

Following our exchange of flatteries, we discussed mundane topics such as integrating Sarjas into the empire, the most popular operas in the capital, and Traitre's famed soap. It was a way of formalizing our friendship. A commoner merchant would move straight to business without wasting time on small talk, but nobles cared about appearances and decorum. So, I made sure to adapt my approach.

Eventually, the count moved on to the main topic.

"Now, now, Miss Ellie. You must be wondering why I invited you today," he said. "The truth is, I hoped to discuss the opening of a Traitre branch in my territory."

"You honor me, my lord. I have no doubt opening a branch in a territory possessing a port as remarkable as yours would benefit my firm."

Our interests matched perfectly, and the discussion moved forward without a hitch. Count Hammitt offered me a five-year tax

exemption and promised to put in a good word for me so I could purchase some land and a building at a low price. In exchange, I'd sell to him preferentially and involve him if I developed new trade routes with other continents through his port.

Since negotiations were complete, I offered him the gift I'd brought. It was an assortment of our finest cosmetics and toiletries. He thanked me profusely and said his wife and daughter had pushed him to request opening a Traitre branch in their territory. I promised I'd welcome them warmly when said store opened. The count smiled as we bade each other farewell.

We sat in the carriage to return home, and I praised Lunoa as she finally relaxed again.

Tomorrow, I'd need to pick employees to send to Count Hammitt's territory. I wanted people I could trust to make the right choices for purchasing the building and securing trade routes. They also needed to be able to deal with nobles to some extent.

Should I send executives from one of the companies Traitre absorbed, employees included? I mused.

People from Hammitt County would be ideal but I didn't know if there were any.

Just as I instructed Lunoa to prepare a list of candidates for me first thing tomorrow morning, we reached the residence.

"Welcome back, Miss Ellie," Mireille greeted me as we stepped into the entrance hall.

Lunoa and I handed her our coats.

"Thank you, Mireille."

Lunoa had accumulated mental fatigue all day while Misha had worked hard driving the carriage.

Once the catkin returned from the stable, I added, "Lunoa, Misha, you can go rest."

"Okay. Thank you," said Lunoa.

"Have a good night, Miss Ellie, Miss Mireille," replied Misha.

I watched them walk away before heading to my office with Mireille.

"I have a couple of things to report," said Mireille after I sat down, a cup of coffee in hand, and let out a deep sigh.

"Regarding?" I inquired.

"The Kingdom of Haldoria."

"Oh? Tell me."

"The agitators you sent to heighten the anti-Haldorian

sentiment in vassal countries following the Sarjan conflict are not having as much effect as we'd hoped."

"What? That's strange," I answered. "The crown prince forsaking a vassal nation after forcing it to wage a war it never wished for should have created a rift in the kingdom's relationships with its vassals. They ought to distrust the kingdom and worry about their fate after such a scandal! If anything, the kingdom should never have given up on Sarjas like that. Preparing to suffer some losses and joining the conflict to protect Sarjas would have been a smarter move on their part."

"I agree. The prime minister would have considered public sentiment and done just that in the past. Your work to prevent such situations from arising for years and his constant focus on the monster invasions that threatened Haldoria or its sphere of influence must have dulled his judgment. He made a hasty decision."

"Well, that man was always more involved in matters that did not require him to think of others' emotions too much, such as monster invasions, countermeasures, legislation, or land development. In addition, I cannot think of anyone at court who could have given him good advice in this particular case."

Naturally, I'd jumped to take advantage of the prime minister's mistake, sending provocateurs to destabilize Haldoria's vassal states and alienate the great power.

"Just as you ordered, we have people spreading accusations that the kingdom only ever intended to use its vassals before discarding them. We're also buying wheat and iron in bulk in regions bordering the countries closest to Sarjas to give them the impression that the kingdom is preparing for war. Also, we have a steady flow of foreign weapons entering these countries."

"The anti-Haldorian sentiment is at its peak, and the conditions are set. We should at least have seen a small rebellion occur by now," I said.

"And yet, there were none. Not to mention, the relationships between Haldoria and its vassal nations are improving by the day."

"Why is that?"

"I'm not sure. Most of the friends we left in the kingdom to gather information aren't privy to such matters. We have no eyes inside the palace, so the reports are few and far between."

"Well, I suppose there isn't much we can do about this. So, we

do not know who to trust inside the palace. Getting in touch with the nobles and domestics I had good relationships with would help us gather intelligence, but it's far too risky."

"Especially considering the fact that many of those who showed goodwill turned on you the second the prince spoke up."

"Friede made quite a show of calling off our engagement," I said, sighing. "I didn't see it coming at all. Honestly, I still don't believe that pair of fools could have put together such an ingenious plan. Several ministers must have been involved. Without their backing, Friede couldn't have kept me in jail for so long with no one doing anything. While no one who was there at the time ranked higher than the crown prince, important ministers and dukes were present. They could have made a move."

"But there is no trace they did anything," Mireille concluded. "They were either pressured into inaction or were conspiring with those who wanted you gone. Perhaps an influential figure was pulling the strings all along. Since we have no way of knowing who they were and whom they control, working with Haldorian nobles is too dangerous."

"Still, we have people left in the capital. They see and hear things," I responded. "That led me to believe Roselia must have something to do with our current predicament."

"Roselia...? The young lady of the ducal House Fadgal?" asked Mireille.

"The very one. After my coming of age stripped her of any chances of marrying Friede, the king introduced her to the heir of Margrave Lambrest, Brenan Lambrest. The two got engaged and she moved to the margravate. But I've received word that they've seen her quite often in the capital. I can only assume the king called her back to take over my role and assist Friede."

"So she's forced to clean up after that idiot, huh? Poor Roselia has it tough."

"It was a smart move, though," I said. "The prime minister will need some time to get his touch back for dealing with sensitive interpersonal matters. Besides, he cannot afford to take his focus away from the monster situation entirely. Roselia's prideful but outstanding and knows how to balance the commoners' expectations with the game of politics. Yet, I'm not sure she's pleased with her current situation."

"During your student days, Lady Roselia set her sights on the

crown princess position. She often competed with you over it, did she not?"

"Yes, I was chosen as the king and the prime minister intended. Being called back when I disappeared must have felt humiliating. Roselia might think this is her big chance if she still wants to be crown princess. But from what I know, she gets along with the margrave's son. She also once wrote to me saying that she rather enjoyed the calm of the countryside. I sincerely doubt she'd be interested in seizing power in the capital."

"Why did she answer the king's summons, then?" asked Mireille. "Lady Roselia has a strong temperament. She's not one to let anyone pressure her into doing something she doesn't want to do."

"She's just like the past me and thinks nobles are obliged to the people to carry out their duties. Had the king and the prime minister not betrayed me, I would have kept doing my best for the kingdom's benefit, even if I weren't Friede's fiancée. The royal family must be desperate to rely on Roselia like that."

"House Fadgal and House Lambrest are part of the militarist faction. The king and the prince won't be able to do whatever they please like they used to when you, the daughter of an ardent royalist, worked with Friede."

"Let alone that the most extreme of the militarists will push for war. They never do the fighting themselves, yet these parasites thrive on the benefits and prestige they can earn during wartime. Roselia is capable but will have a hard time keeping the members of her own faction at bay while thwarting my plans."

I grinned, looking down at the map on my desk representing one of Haldoria's vassal nations, the Kingdom of Aft. It was one of the countries I was working the hardest to destabilize. And so I moved around a few pieces, visually organizing the information Mireille had received from our people in the kingdom.

"Roselia normalized the prices of the war goods I'd been tampering with and even convinced Aft's leadership that Haldoria would not forsake them under any circumstances," I said.

"Indeed. As a result, the anti-Haldorian sentiment that had taken over the elites of the Kingdom of Aft is dying down."

I took a sip of my lukewarm coffee and held it in my mouth, swirling it around while contemplating the situation.

"Even so, influencing the government isn't something we can

do," I said. "After all, I'm nothing more than a commoner merchant. Their suzerain, the kingdom, will have more sway no matter what I do. While Roselia is pushing a diplomatic approach for now and focusing on recovering their trust, the kingdom will display its military power. What we're doing won't be enough to get the Kingdom of Aft or any of Haldoria's vassals to defect."

"What should we do?"

"We need a new course of action by heavily pushing the propaganda at the people, not the nobles. Shall we say..." I paused to think. "We'll exaggerate the crimes that Friede's troops committed in the empire. How about adding that he tried to pass those atrocities as Sarjas's doing? I doubt that'll be enough to sever the relationships between the two countries. The people should grow to hate Haldoria, don't you think?"

The fact that most of it was true would help us. Instead of spreading lies, exaggerating the truth was far more effective.

Mireille bowed and answered, "I'll make preparations immediately, miss."

◇

A bird delivered more news to my office less than a month after that conversation.

"As expected of Roselia," I said. "She works fast."

Just as I finished reading the coded message, I burned it. I'd changed my approach, giving up on engaging in information warfare with the nobles and moving on to manipulating the people. But Roselia had been quick to adapt.

"She made up a pretext to exonerate the vassal states of the taxes they paid the kingdom, now distributing food and dispatching healers for free treatment. It's all happening under Friede's name, and the money supposedly comes from his personal funds. I cannot fathom that idiotic prince going so far to help the poor. This has to be Roselia's doing."

"Do we act?" asked Mireille.

I nodded and said, "Of course. They won't be able to kill the rumors entirely. Regardless of how much money they throw at a charity, only a fraction of the people will effectively benefit from it. We need to take our time and make sure our propaganda permeates the minds of others. Inform our agents to keep going, Mireille.

While they're at it, they should spread rumors that the money used to pay for the food distribution comes directly from their taxes and that the Haldorian nobles even pocketed part of it. Oh, and that the healers prioritize cities whose officials have bribed the Haldorians. Even if we don't see immediate results, we're in no hurry. Let us take it slow."

"Understood, miss."

Having given Mireille my instructions concerning the kingdom, I refocused my attention on my work for the firm by taking the next document on the pile.

◇

A few days after I negotiated with Count Hammitt, I was busy checking Traitre's balance of payments thanks to the ledger Lunoa had brought me. Misha walked into my office carrying papers and boxes.

"Miss Ellie, the property management department sent a query," she said.

"What is it about?" I mused.

"They've finished sorting out the real estate Traitre acquired after the recent mergers and found that some good properties were currently unused. The department believes using them for something might be more advantageous than selling them but would like to know your stance."

"Where are they located?" I asked Misha while glancing at Mireille.

My trusted confidant immediately understood my intentions and presented a map of the imperial capital from a shelf. I followed what she was doing from the corner of my eye while taking the stack of papers Misha was handing me.

"All the information is here," she said.

A prime location just next to the noble district, a large piece of land on the edge of the artisan district, and a building in the central part of the business district... I checked the addresses one by one on my map. Sure enough, they were all great locations.

"But I don't believe we need more stores," I said.

"Quite so. Our current workshops and stores are more than enough," agreed Mireille.

"There isn't much we can do with them besides letting them sit

until we're ready to launch new products. I suppose we could open specialized stores once the perfume and cosmetics lines for beastkin are complete."

Our new line of perfume would be named Elumia, after the name ancient elves had given to tarcses. The Elumia series, available in many variations, would surely swoop over the market in a heartbeat once we released it.

Sitting at the desk next to mine, Lunoa paused her work on the budget estimate and read through the latest report we'd gotten this morning from the research team.

"The research on tarcses is yielding good results," she said. "We should be able to develop men's cologne, air freshener, and a couple of other products on top of the perfume aimed at women. The team also discovered that these flowers can have deodorant properties. Won't that come in handy for our beastkin cosmetics?"

"You're right. Tell the team working on tarcses to cooperate with the beastkin cosmetics team."

We discussed the products' development until someone knocked on the door and asked if they could come in. I agreed, and an old gentleman with graying hair swept back walked in. Arnaud Langley, whose butler uniform fit him like a glove, had been with me since my days in the kingdom and mainly took care of this residence. Despite his age, he was always full of energy.

"Miss Ellie, this came from the Merchants' Guild," replied Arnaud, placing a letter on a little tray before me.

"Thank you."

I opened the letter and saw it concerned my Special License. They had officially approved me and requested that I go to the guild at my earliest convenience.

"Misha, ready the carriage," I ordered. "As soon as we finish this, I'm heading to the guild."

"At once, miss," she said.

◇

My carriage ran through the main avenue past midday, taking me toward the Merchants' Guild. Mireille was driving today, and I was the only passenger. We went through the usual path and promptly stepped out of the carriage when we arrived and entered the building.

No matter the time, the Merchants' Guild was always bustling with all kinds of activity. The large negotiation space on the left was especially noisy.

We headed straight for the reception in front of the entrance, and I greeted a receptionist who seemed free. She must have known I'd be coming because she immediately led me to another room where the capital's guild master of the Merchants' Guild, Calvin Main, waited. The demonkin was the right-hand man of Count Albert Guide, the grand master of the Merchants' Guild who ruled over every branch of the organization in the Yutear Empire. I'd met him several times in the past to fill out documents and discuss formalities.

"I was waiting for you, Miss Ellie."

"Forgive me for the wait, Mr. Calvin," I stated, shaking hands with him.

He gestured for me to sit on the sofa across from him, and I did so. Mireille went to stand quietly behind me.

"All right, Miss Ellie," he started. "I wrote as much, so you must already know that your Special License has received official approval as of today. As a Special License holder, you'll be allowed to purchase plots of land, request loans from the government, benefit from eased restrictions for limited items, and receive beneficial treatment in general. In return, you must pay a license tax and accept audits from the Merchants' Guild whenever necessary. Are we in agreement?"

"Yes."

"Good. I would also like to remind you that inspections will be stricter than usual for your company because of your background."

"That's perfectly all right," I said.

"In that case, please accept this," Calvin said, handing me a small box decorated with the empire and the guild's crests.

Inside were a certificate confirming that I was now a Special License holder and a new guild card with updated information.

"Please use this card from now on. I'll destroy the old one for you," he said.

"I'll leave it to you, then."

I had to sign a document to attest I'd indeed received the certificate and the new card, including that I'd given Calvin my old card in exchange.

"That is all, Miss Ellie Leis, chair of the Traitre Commercial

Firm."

"Thank you very much for your time."

"Please do your best for our empire's economy from now on."

That was how I officially became a Special License holder and could extend my reach farther. Since I would soon create a branch in Count Hammitt's territory, I considered importing goods from other continents.

Should I try acquiring the raw materials I read about when I was in the kingdom? I thought.

Although I was so busy that I couldn't do much with this information, I was now in a position to create products. Some materials were limited items, but I could bypass most restrictions with my license.

All right, let's put in an order once I get back.

Hiring a tamer or a summoner whose familiars could go back and forth across different continents would be pricey, but the materials I had in mind were well worth it.

I returned to my carriage proud and in high spirits.

◇

Dressed in traveling clothes, I was ready to go to Count Hammitt's county—which wasn't that far from the capital—to get the goods I'd ordered from abroad through his port. Then, I'd go to Sarjas.

Two months ago, I'd sent a team led by an employee who came from Hammitt County to prepare for the branch's opening. I'd check their progress and pay a visit to Count Hammitt to greet him before the opening and signing a proper contract.

I would head to Sarjas later with the materials I'd bought to process them there. The region's climate and water quality suited the development of that particular product.

Mireille, Lunoa, and Misha would accompany me. However, Mireille and Lunoa would return to the capital after we dealt with the matters pertaining to the new branch and signed the contract with Count Hammitt. Only Misha would go with me to Sarjas.

After Misha checked the luggage we'd loaded onto the carriage, gave food and water to the horses, and readied the horses' gear, she came to me.

"The preparations are complete on my side, Miss Ellie."

“I’m done too,” I answered. “Are Mireille and Lunoa ready?”

“Miss Mireille is with Mr. Arnaud, discussing who will take over her work in her absence, and Miss Lunoa went to the restroo— Oh, there she is.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” exclaimed Lunoa, trotting to us.

Mireille appeared at the end of the entrance hall at that very moment.

“Let us be on our way, then,” I said.

The road to Hammitt County was well maintained as merchants who made their livelihood from selling imported goods used it daily. That made the trip very pleasant. As always, paved roads were much easier to travel on—both for the horses and ourselves—compared to those that had merely been hardened by constant passage.

After continuing down this path for some time, we reached a camping site. The sun remained high in the sky, but we stopped nonetheless. Beyond this point was a large forest; we’d have to spend the night in the middle if we kept going. We’d relax here for the rest of the day and resume our journey early tomorrow.

The following day, we left at the crack of dawn and exited the forest when the sun was at its zenith. The scent of the sea tickled my nose as we passed over a small hill, and the endless blue came into view. Even the surface of the water gleamed under the sun.

“Wow! Is that the sea?!”

“Is it your first time seeing the sea, Lunoa?” I asked.

“Yes!”

“What about you, Misha?”

“I saw it several times when my parents were still alive. We even got on a boat once.” Misha sounded like she wasn’t impressed but I could see her ears and tail waving. She was just as excited as Lunoa.

“We have some leeway today. Would you like to go see the sea once we’re done with our errands?”

“Yes!” Lunoa and Misha exclaimed in unison.

With the reins in her hands, Mireille picked up the pace upon hearing the girls’ enthusiasm.

“What a lively city,” I said as we passed through the gate after showing the guards our identification papers.

The city was beautiful with its stone-paved streets and its white

stone buildings. Carriages that I assumed belonged to merchants continuously traveled through the large avenues that led to the plaza. Street vendors sold fish, nets full of seashells, and a wide array of other things in that area. Everywhere I looked, people were bustling. As one could expect from a city where countless merchants gathered day after day, most inns stood next to large horse stables. We'd be staying at Traitre's branch, so we didn't need to book an inn, though. Mireille had informed them of our arrival beforehand, and she directed the horses toward the building.

Traitre's branch office was made of white stones like the other buildings in the city. It was a two-story construction, complete with a basement and an adjoining warehouse.

Hauel, the person I'd put in charge of the Hammitt County branch, was waiting for us in front of the door.

"I hope the trip didn't tire you out, Miss Ellie," he said.

"You didn't need to come out to greet us," I said while Mireille passed the reins of the carriage to the houseboy beside Hauel. "Did you get me an appointment with Count Hammitt?"

"Of course. You are to meet with him at two," answered Hauel.

"We still have some time, then."

"I had water heated. Would you like to wash off the travel grime before meeting with the count?"

"I shall take you up on that offer."

We followed Hauel inside the remodeled building and bathed one after the other in the bathroom reserved for the firm's employees. After we made ourselves presentable again, it was time to go meet with Count Hammitt.

The count's residence stood on high ground, with a view of the sea. It was also composed of white stones and fit right in with the rest of the city.

Lunoa and I were shown to a drawing room, and the count did not make us wait this time.

"Hello, Miss Ellie, Miss Carlton. It's been a while," he greeted us.

"It has, my lord," I remarked. "Please allow me to thank you for the exceptional consideration you have shown our company."

"Don't mention it. Once your store opens, my territory shall benefit greatly too. I believe that is referred to as a win-win situation, is it not? Now, take a seat, please."

"Thank you."

“Th-Thank you,” Lunoa stuttered.

“Allow me to introduce my family,” Count Hammitt said as two women entered the room, sitting next to him. “This is my wife, Camilla, and my daughter, Manilla. My son, who’ll succeed me, is currently in the capital for his studies.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Camilla, Lady Manilla.”

“This feeling is mutual, Miss Ellie. I was hoping to make your acquaintance.”

“Me as well. You are the talk of high society.”

“My, my. I’m a little scared to ask what they say,” I said.

The two ladies laughed. I glanced at Lunoa, whose smile had turned stiff from nervousness. When she noticed my gaze, she took a set of beautiful vials from the bag I’d asked her to hold on to and handed them to me. I politely offered them to Count Hammitt’s wife and daughter.

“This is my firm’s newest product, Elumia. We’ll start selling these perfumes in two months. Feel free to try them if you’d like.”

Count Hammitt forced a smile at the sight of his wife and daughter giggling. We exchanged a few words before he brought out the contract, and we signed it. Afterward, Lunoa and I enjoyed a friendly talk with Camilla and Manilla. Later, we bade them farewell to join Mireille and Misha before heading to the port on foot.

We stopped by the stalls lined up alongside the plaza for a late seafood lunch. During that time, we studied the fish and shells in the large wire nets and ordered skewers of what had caught our eye.

Lunoa nervously brought her prawn skewer, which had a fragrant sauce covering it, to her mouth. As soon as she had a taste, her face lit up. Misha had had no such hesitation and was stuffing her mouth with salted grilled fish.

“I never knew prawns were so delicious! They’re sweet and tender,” Lunoa excitedly told Misha.

I watched the two of them exchange their impressions on the food as I took a bite of my own grilled shellfish skewer. Eating like that was far from refined, but I enjoyed how the rich seafood aroma, the sourness of the sauce, and the flavor filled my mouth.

“Why do they sell fish in the capital but not prawns or shellfish?” asked Lunoa.

“You could eat prawns or shellfish in the capital,” I said. “But

shellfish and other crustaceans are harder to transport without going bad. So, you usually need to make a reservation at a luxurious restaurant and specify that you'd like seafood. It's rather expensive."

"Miss Ellie, how come they don't go bad in that case?"

"They hire an ice magician to ensure they stay frozen during the entire trip. Plus, they change horses several times to make the journey as short as possible. That's why it's impossible to bring large quantities at once. You'd need too many horses and magicians, which would increase the prices."

Lunoa and Misha froze when I told them the cost of what we ate would be in the capital. We tasted a few more dishes we weren't used to seeing before finally arriving at the port.

Even though the ship my merchandise was on would only arrive in two days, I was here today for another reason. According to my intel, this was the right place. But...

I kept an eye on Lunoa and Misha, who were excitedly admiring the ships while taking a good look around the port. Fortunately, I spotted what I was looking for—a dark alley between two buildings.

"Let's go," I said to my companions before entering the narrow passage.

As we dived into this desolate place filled with violence, the sunny, vibrant, and lovely port almost felt like a lie. It was another world altogether. With ships coming in from abroad, no regulations could prevent the emergence of such places. If anything, the lord deserved praise for being so thorough that this hellhole stayed strictly separate, not to impact the lives of regular citizens in the slightest.

We hadn't walked long when a group of men blocked our path.

"This is a dangerous place for young ladies like you," one of them said. "Don't worry, we'll guide you to safety—for a fee. If you'd like, we could even work out some...other arrangements."

His friends smirked.

"What a kind offer," I said. "But we'll pass, thank you."

"Huh?"

"Misha," I called.

"Yes?"

"Leave that conceited jerk in the middle aside and teach the others a lesson. You can do it, right?"

"Yes, Miss Ellie," affirmed the catkin, stepping forward.

The men laughed.

"Come on, even if the kid's a beastkin, this is pushing it. You shouldn't underestimate us— URGH?!"

Misha lunged forward and delivered a high kick to the chin of the man who'd just spoken, making the others freeze. The group didn't strike me as brigands who had experience taking others' lives, and they definitely were far from being strong enough to battle with monsters like adventurers. Most of the time, the hoodlums you encountered in the city were just like them and didn't amount to much.

Just then, Misha moved swiftly and slipped into their blind spots before defeating them one after the other. Only the one who'd initially called out to us remained. I extended my hand toward him, and he gasped.

But Misha's ears twitched, so she jumped back in a hurry. I had no intention of letting my attack touch her, but she was so sensitive to mana that she must have gotten spooked.

"U-Urgh..." the man whimpered, falling to his knees. His face turned pale as he started shivering.

"Wh-What happened to him?" inquired Lunoa.

"This is a skill called Suppression. You imbue bloodlust into your mana and fling it at your opponent to put them into a state of terror and stop their movements. It won't work against someone stronger than you, but it still has many convenient applications. You can use it as a feint or to interrogate someone," explained Mireille.

I stopped my skill and let the man take a deep breath.

"Now then, shall we take you up on that offer? Would you be so kind as to guide us to your boss?" I asked.

"N-No! L-Let me go! I'm sorry! I'll never appear before you again so—" I activated Suppression again. "ARGH!"

"You'll take us, right?"

After a couple more minutes of back-and-forth, the man finally gave up, meekly showing us the way.

"Th-This way, please," he said weakly.

We followed him to a large building. While it looked somewhat decrepit, the crowd of lookouts told me it wasn't mere criminals occupying it.

"Hey! Who the hell are these girls?"

"They... So... Um..."

“I have some business with your boss,” I said. “Please inform him that Ellie Leis is here.”

I received quite a few quizzical looks, but a guard went inside. Everyone waited in silence until he returned and announced, “The boss will see you.”

Despite the building seeming to be in ruins from the outside, delicate vases and paintings lavishly decorated the interior. It would put to shame the average nobleman’s house.

The guard led us to an extravagant ornate door and stopped.

He knocked and said, “Boss, I brought Miss Ellie Leis to you.”

“Come in,” a voice responded from inside.

The door opened, and I stepped in while the guard remained outside. Three individuals inhabited the room: a demonkin woman who had opened the door and appeared to be a secretary, an elf sitting at his desk in front of a filing cabinet and surrounded by documents, and a human man. The human man was sitting at an expensive elder treant desk, resting his chin on his hand and directing his piercing gaze at me.

“So you’re the famous Ellie Leis, huh?” he said. “I hear you went wild during the border conflict. What do you want with me? Need me to give your business a little push? I might consider it if you let me have your maid for a night.”

He let out a vulgar laugh, to which Misha glared at him, disgusted. Mireille was expressionless, but I felt the mana surrounding her body intensify ever so slightly. I sighed and waved my hand as if I were chasing away a fly. A ball of ice roughly the size of a human head appeared in my palm, and I hurled it at the man. The impact pushed him back, his chair getting lodged into the wall. I’d held back, so I doubted he was dead. At most, I’d probably shattered a couple of his bones.

“I’m not in the mood to have you test my patience,” I said, staring at the elven man.

The elven man emitted a strained laugh and stood up, bowing his head in apology with an elegant motion. “Do forgive me. I’m Million, the one in charge of this place.”

“I’m Ellie Leis of Traitre.”

“I’ve heard much about you. It’s an honor to finally meet you. Please, have a seat. Your companions are welcome to sit with us as well.”

He ordered the demonkin woman to bring the passed-out man

elsewhere and moved from his desk to a table.

I sat on the sofa.

"I'm fine here," said Mireille, standing behind me.

"Me too," Misha added.

"Lunoa, you come here," I directed her.

"A-All right," she stuttered, complying immediately.

Million sat opposite us, and a wry smile appeared on his well-groomed face. "Still, this is quite the forceful visit, don't you think?"

"I'm doing things your way," I commented. "Or was there a dress code I missed?"

Million shrugged. "Let us move on. What brings you here?"

"Nothing much. I'm going to start doing business in this city so I decided to introduce myself."

"I believe Traitre is under the direct patronage of our dear lord. You don't need our benediction, do you?"

"I happen to be aware that sitting idly by and relying on the count won't do me any good," I said. "The count has more than enough influence to deal with nobles and merchants of the empire, but as a nobleman, he won't be able to interfere if any trouble with foreign sailors arises. Besides, your organization has deep roots in this city and strong connections with the citizens. We're not here to create trouble."

Setting aside that Count Hammitt maintained the peace of this city, Million's organization did the same for the underground world. These people were what we called a mafia. They took protection fees from merchants in exchange for stepping in when trouble arose. Acting like you owned the place because the lord protected you would undoubtedly lead to friction in such a city. I wanted to avoid that.

"I'd like for Traitre to receive your protection too," I continued. "Naturally, I shall compensate you appropriately."

"And what if I refuse?"

"That is your right. But in that case, I suppose I'll have no choice but to replace you with one of my people," I said, activating Suppression while holding back a little. Million did not budge one bit and simply shrugged.

"If someone as impressive as you is willing to make us such an offer, it must mean that we're worth more than I thought," he said.

"It means that I value my business in this city."

“Anyhow, aren’t you concerned about the risks of hurting me?”

“Because Mr. Hokins has your back?”

As I said this name out loud, Million’s expression shifted for the very first time. Surprise had painted his features for less than a second, soon concealed behind a controlled smile. I hadn’t missed it, though. He’d been trying to gauge how much I knew, not expecting me to cut to the chase.

“On the surface, you stand at the top of this ‘autonomous’ underground organization. We both know your group is all but autonomous. You answer to a member of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council, Darc Hokins, the Chief. Touching you means making an enemy of the man who controls most of the unlawful organizations in this empire. I’d like to avoid this if I can help it. That is why I took the trouble of coming to you to negotiate before using force.”

Million took in a deep breath and relaxed his shoulders before raising both hands.

“Fine, I surrender,” he said. “Please have mercy.”

“I have no intentions to escalate things if you agree to protect my firm.”

“We will. I would not like to be on the bad side of someone who wants to avoid making an enemy of the Chief ‘if they can help it.’ Should Traitre’s branch in this county get mixed up in trouble, I promise we’ll do what we can to resolve the issue.”

I nodded, then turned to look at Lunoa. She’d been holding her breath as she watched our exchange, but now she quickly snapped out of it and took out the small packet I’d given her. Once she set it on the table, Million grabbed it and peeked inside.

“You shall receive the same compensation every month,” I said.

“That seems like a lot.”

“You may think of it as an apology for taking up so much of your time today.”

Having promised to pay every month, I stood up and left the building. There was no need for contracts in these circles. Now, Traitre could conduct business in this city without issues.

On our way back from Million’s hideout, Lunoa appeared drained. Negotiating with an underground organization had taken its toll on her.

“I was so stressed!” she whined.

“You need to work on your mental health, Lunoa,” I claimed.

“Yes... I’ll do my best,” she said. “But, Miss Ellie, why did you conduct such forceful negotiations this time? Was that needed? Considering Mr. Million would have probably consented to protect Traitre if you had a regular appointment and asked him.”

“Though we asked for their collaboration, you mustn’t forget that these people are outlaws. I needed to demonstrate they shouldn’t underestimate me. Besides, this is my first time interacting with a group linked to Darc Hokins, the Chief. I wanted to show him what I could do,” I elaborated. “Knowing when to push and when to step back during a negotiation is quite difficult. The time will come when you have to negotiate with such an organization, so I hope you remember today and learn from it.”

“I-I will!”

After returning to the firm and putting down my luggage, I checked on Lunoa and Misha. Both were in the middle of a cheerful conversation, changing from their outside clothes to more casual outfits. While they appeared tired, neither of them seemed to conceal injuries or sickness.

Lunoa, who’d been so tense earlier, had let it all go. Misha rarely got stressed when dealing with nobles, so I was pleased to find she was still true to herself in front of underworld leaders. Thankfully, they were strong enough not to let an encounter like that weigh them down. Although, Lunoa still needed to practice keeping her cool.

“Let us go to a nearby restaurant for dinner,” I said.

I decided to take them to a nicer place than usual to reward them for their efforts.

The next day, we had no work planned.

The ship I was waiting for wouldn’t arrive until tomorrow, so I initially thought about spending the day visiting the city and killing time. But Camilla and Manilla, the count’s wife and daughter, had extended an invitation to us when we had visited them. Today, we’d see them again.

“Welcome, Miss Ellie,” the countess greeted me.

“Thank you very much for inviting us today,” I answered.

We’d barely finished exchanging greetings when our hostess showed us to the backyard of their estate. Count Hammitt’s residence stood on high ground but had a slope in the back leading to a lovely sandy beach. The beautiful bay did not have other

accessible paths and served as the family's private beach. Sea bathing wasn't very common in the Central Continent, but nobles sometimes swam in lakes to escape the summer heat. Most times, only the gentlemen did so.

"Wow! It's beautiful!" exclaimed Lunoa.

"Can we really swim here?" asked Misha.

"Yes, father is trying to popularize sea bathing to attract tourists. He created a swimming area for commoners last year, and the initiative is gradually bringing in more and more visitors," said Manilla gently, smiling at the two girls.

We wore clothes made especially to enter the water called "bathing suits." Such clothes were seldom seen in the Central Continent, though Count Hammitt's efforts to push sea bathing meant they got sold all over the city.

Lunoa wore a two-piece bathing suit decorated with frills, while Misha wore a one-piece especially made for beastkin with a little hole for her tail to pass through. Mireille had put on a monochrome bikini, and I wore a similar bikini but threw a pareu atop it.

"Follow me, Lunoa, Misha!" cheered Manilla.

"Y-Yes!"

"Yes, Lady Manilla."

"Make sure to stretch before you enter the water!"

Manilla, also in a bathing suit, ran toward the water with Lunoa and Misha. In the meantime, Mireille and Manilla's waiting maid followed without haste, warning them.

I sat with Camilla in the shadow of the parasols and had a piece of cooled fruit that her domestics had prepared for us.

"It's my first time visiting a beach, and I must say this is quite pleasant," I commented.

"I find myself spending much time here during the warm days," replied Camilla.

"It won't be long before this place becomes a popular summer retreat for nobles."

Camilla let out a small laugh. "The truth is, I often invite friends of mine here. Their children always seemed to have fun, but the noble ladies were so scared of sunburns and tanning that they barely swam. After your company's sunscreen came out six months ago, everyone started enjoying their time here."

"I'm glad to have been of use."

The product she was referring to was a sunscreen my research

team had discovered by chance while studying elumia flowers. While the magic item wasn't quite medicine, it had faint yet long-lasting healing properties. We sold it for a fairly high price, but it was quite popular among nobles as they did not want to tan. If sea bathing continued to trend, demand would increase.

This territory was one of the gateways to the empire, and the Kingdom of Haldoria was a country that often dealt with Hammitt County. Getting close to the count's family could benefit me in the future.

With ulterior motives in mind, I told Camilla, "Traitre is working on developing cosmetics that also act as sunscreen. When they come to fruition, I shall send you samples. Would you be amenable to helping me advertise them?"

"My, it'd be my pleasure!"

Camilla and I engaged in an enthusiastic conversation on beauty and cosmetics while enjoying the cooled fruit and watching the children play in the water.

◇

The following day, I awoke in the living space on the second floor of the firm's building. After breakfast, I'd go to the port with Mireille to recover my order. Because Lunoa and Misha had the day off, I gave them some spending money and asked Hauel to show them around.

"Miss Ellie, the carriage is ready," Mireille said.

"Let us go at once," I said before turning to look at Lunoa and Misha again. "Make sure to be back by three, all right?"

"Yes, miss!"

"Understood!"

"Hauel, I leave them in your care."

"Don't worry," he said.

After reminding Hauel, I boarded the carriage while Mireille grabbed the reins.

The port was close enough for us to walk, but we needed the carriage to carry the merchandise. A ship from the Reki Empire, a unified nation of the Southern Continent, transported my order and had transited by the Western Continent before getting here.

Once I arrived at the port, I looked through the ships to find the one I had business with and approached a sailor unloading cargo.

"Excuse me. I'm from the Traitre Commercial Firm; may I see the captain?" I asked.

"Traitre? Oh, right! You're the one who sent a familiar to place an order, right?"

"Indeed."

"Please wait a minute... Hey! Where's the boss?" he asked one of his comrades.

"This way. Follow me."

Mireille and I followed the other man aboard the ship. Around us, incredibly busy sailors merrily shouted directions while unloading their cargo or performing maintenance.

The man brought us to a large cabin, and we finally met the captain. He was a muscular, tanned man whose hair and eyes were as black as those of a woman I'd met before—Yuuka Kusunoki. However, he was not from the eastern archipelago but from the

Reki Empire.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain Nguyen."

"Ah, you're from Traitre. Um…Miss Ellie, was it?"

"Indeed."

"Look, I'm terrible at the roundabout and tedious processes. How about we skip the pleasantries?" said Nguyen. Merchant politics didn't seem to be his strong suit, as he cut short our introductions and directed his attention to one of his sailors. "Hey, you. Bring me you-know-what!"

Later, a group of men walked back with five carefully shut wooden crates. They appeared to have used magic to seal the boxes.

"Here's your order. Check it."

"Don't mind if I do," I said, undoing the seals with my mana and opening the first crate.

Inside the boxes were water and countless round objects that resembled pearls. I took a handful and checked the state of the goods before putting them back in and activating the seal once more. The wood had a magic seal engraved, turning it into a magic item of sorts. Then, I moved on to the four other crates.

"Everything seems to be in order," I said.

"Then you can take them."

"My carriage is waiting right outside. Could I trouble you to carry them for me?"

"Sure thing. Guys! Bring those to her carriage!" Nguyen ordered his men. As they started carrying out his command, he turned to me again. "What are you going to do with all this?"

"Start a new business," I said. "If it works as intended, that is. I'm not sure yet."

Nguyen hummed. "You merchants sure like to torture your brains, huh?"

He looked puzzled, but I ignored his remark. Instead, I asked about something that had caught my eye. "The men on your ship all look quite energetic, don't they, Captain Nguyen?"

"Huh? Well, we're men of the sea. We're nothing like the weaklings that hang out on land."

"That's not exactly what I meant. You departed from the Southern Continent and stopped by the Western Continent before coming to this port, did you not? Normally, a few men would fall victim to the sailors' disease during such a long journey."

Sailors' disease was a peculiar illness many contracted during

long sea journeys. The infected person's gums would bleed, their teeth would fall out, and their wounds wouldn't close up at all.

"So that's what it's about. It used to be an issue, sure. Men had to drop out after some time at sea. Thanks to this"—he picked up a jar full of shredded cabbage—"no one falls sick anymore."

"Is that...sauerkraut?" I asked.

"Yeah. Just gotta eat it often, and you won't get sailors' disease."

"Is that true?!"

"I ain't learned, so I can't tell you why that is. But it sure works. A very smart lass in my country told me so. Honestly, I consulted her as a joke. Thought nothing would come out of it, but she told me about that sauerkraut thing. Apparently, some scholars from the Northern Continent found that eating it on land and at sea prevents sailors' disease."

"That's how...? That's an incredible discovery!" I exclaimed.

"These days, most people know about this in the Southern Continent," he said. "I hear they've sent word to the Maritime Guilds of this continent so the news should spread fast enough."

This initiative meant there was someone wise enough to get ahold of these findings and act in the Reki Empire. I couldn't help but feel intrigued.

I gave Nguyen the sum I owed him.

"And here are the books you wanted," I said.

"Thanks. Sorry to bother you with that. I don't know many people around here."

"It's no problem. I deducted their price from the money I just handed you," I explained.

The books he'd requested covered an array of topics. Some were research papers and other technical books, with popular novels and plays thrown in the mix.

"Could that 'very smart lass' you mentioned have asked you to get these for her?" I asked.

"Yeah. She says she wants to expand her knowledge. Can't say I relate. Five pages are enough to put me to sleep." Nguyen laughed heartily.

I disembarked from the ship with Mireille and boarded the carriage, where the crates had been loaded. We returned to the firm, but Lunoa and the others weren't back yet. The new building was incredibly quiet.

Thus, I worked on some formal documents necessary for Traitre to officially start its activity in this city. I was in the office when Lunoa and Misha came back.

I welcomed them and thanked Hauel for watching over them before informing the girls of what would come next.

"As planned, Misha and I will depart for Sarjas tomorrow. Mireille and Lunoa will return to the capital by carriage."

We couldn't store the materials I'd just acquired for too long. They'd already gone through a long voyage on that ship, and I needed to get them to Sarjas as soon as possible. That was why Misha and I would depart tomorrow while Mireille and Lunoa headed to the capital.

"Misha and I will be away from the capital for a few months. I'll leave Traitre in your hands, Mireille. Lunoa, assist her in any way you can."

"Certainly, miss."

"I'll do my best!"

"Hauel, you will remain in charge of the Hammitt County branch. If anything happens, contact the main branch in the capital," I continued.

"I will. Please leave it to me, Miss Ellie."

After I gave them a few more details on what I expected, Hauel went home while the four of us had dinner at a nearby restaurant. During our meal, I brought up the wise lady from the Reki Empire that Nguyen had mentioned.

"The Reki Empire is the powerhouse that rules over the Southern Continent, right?" asked Misha.

"Exactly. From what I know, Reki's culture greatly differs from ours. I've never been there, though," I said.

"But is she really that amazing? Aren't the ones who came up with the preventive measures the researchers from the Northern Continent?"

"It's not that simple."

Misha wasn't wrong in the sense that the wise lady of the Reki Empire had discovered nothing. That information came from elsewhere. But there was more to this.

"I've read that paper too," I said.

My discussion with Nguyen had stayed in my mind, and I'd consulted my Grimoire of Lucifer to make sure. When I saw the paper was there, I read over it quickly again.

“It highlights the fact that eating habits cause sailors’ disease. But nothing in it indicates the exact cause or any mention of possible treatments.”

Mireille couldn’t hide her surprise. “Does that mean she made that discovery herself?!”

“I’m not sure. From what Nguyen said, it didn’t sound like that young lady was a researcher. She may have drawn that conclusion from reading several papers on the topic.”

“That’s incredible!”

Knowing a lot of things and having the ability to apply that knowledge were two entirely different things. She must have read many theses, deduced the precise cause behind sailors’ disease, and created a way to prevent it based on her knowledge of other topics like nutrition. There was no doubt that the girl was a genius.

The four of us continued talking about the mysterious genius from the Southern Continent until the topic shifted to the materials I’d acquired.

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A man sat in a luxuriously decorated yet tasteful room. Only one lamp was on, leaving the space dimly lit.

“So that merchant girl was on par with you,” said the man, tilting his glass lazily as he looked down at the burly man with a large scar on his face kneeling at his feet.

“No... She would have come out on top had we kept fighting.”

“Interesting.” The man’s smile grew. “Good work, Graham. You may go.”

“Excuse me!”

“Crow,” the man said after Graham had left the room.

He’d addressed the empty space around him, but, nonetheless, a voice answered, “Yes?”

Behind him, a woman stood as if she’d been there the entire time. She wore a black dress that seemed to merge with the darkness, and a black veil concealed her features. All in all, the woman left a very indistinct impression.

“What do you make of this?” asked the man.

“Considering what Colonel Graham had to say, I doubt she’s an ordinary merchant.”

“Right... Should I probe a little?” The man closed his eyes to

think for a moment. “Is Scorpion still in Haldoria?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Tell her to relocate to the empire and gather information on that merchant. She’s free to use any means she likes.”

“Understood.”

In the innermost part of the royal palace of the Kingdom of Haldoria, a woman bowed deeply.

“I shall take my leave for today.”

“All right. Please do visit us soon, all right?”

“Yeah. You’re welcome to come again.”

“Thank you, Your Highness, Lady Sylvia.”

Chris, who frequently visited the palace as the favorite merchant of the prince’s fiancée, Sylvia, left the room with a bow. She was guided outside by a maid, whom she politely thanked, before returning to her lodging. Soon after she entered the room she was renting, she noticed an unfamiliar letter on the desk. She looked around the room cautiously and saw nothing out of place.

After pausing for a moment, Chris picked up the letter. The sender’s name was not on it, but she found a crow feather inside alongside a message. Chris read through it, then immediately threw it into the small brazier in the corner of her room and lit it with fire magic. The paper burned to ashes, erasing all evidence.

“Next is the empire, huh?” she whispered to no one in particular as she started packing up for her journey.

◇◆☆◆◇

Today, the sea is calm, and our field of vision is clear—all perfect conditions for the maiden voyage of this magic-powered ship, the first of its kind.

We left the port of the Dukedom of Haldoria sixteen days ago and should reach the port of Hammitt County in the Yutear Empire in two days.

I’m writing these lines after having taken my lunch in the captain’s cabin. Our cook makes truly excellent curry, which goes wonderfully with the special pickles he serves. I got seconds twice.

The young sailors have got nothing on me!

This voyage also comes with a mission, as the chair has tasked us to deliver an official letter to Count Hammitt. Hammitt County is one of the places where our company sells its flagship perfume. The head of the Hammitt family has been involved with our firm for generations; maintaining good relationships with that family is crucial for the job.

While I was writing, a magic transmission arrived from Hammitt County. I'll pause my writing to handle it.

End of transmission. I've got to treat the transmission operators to a drink when we get to the county. That's all Tom's doing. He just had to go and promise that on my behalf, huh?

We'll anchor the ship in the empire for a week. I need to figure out what souvenirs to bring my wife and kid, who are waiting for me in the dukedom. Last time, I brought my daughter a doll that's popular in the empire. She hated it, so I can't mess up and disappoint her this time too. I'll ask John, my navigation officer, for advice and select the perfect gift. Hang on, isn't John the one who told me to get the doll? I think his girlfriend hated his gift too... I should ask someone else, right?

Excerpt from the personal logbook of Gareth Markson, captain of the *Lunoa Carlton*, a magic-powered ship of the Dukedom of Haldoria.

Chapter 2: The Battle of Milista

Misha and I made our way to Sarjas after parting with Mireille and Lunoa in Hammitt County, our carriage loaded with wooden crates.

A path that led north to a small village was on the way from the fortress to the former royal capital. It was beside a large, beautiful lake that would provide us with the perfect environment for the materials we'd brought. Through a bit of negotiation, I employed everyone in the village.

We had a fairly long journey from Hammitt County, so Misha and I took turns driving the carriage. Today, I was in charge of it until noon. Misha would take over and drive during the afternoon and evening.

I followed the beaten path, keeping a slow pace so our cargo wouldn't be damaged. The weather was nice and sunny, making traveling on such a fine day feel nice.

Inside the carriage, Misha focused intently on the wooden crates as the canvas top shielded her from the sun. She couldn't help but be curious.

"Miss Ellie, why aren't you storing these away inside your Divine Artifact?" she asked.

"My Grimoire of Mammon cannot take in living beings," I said.

"Eh?! Th-There are living things in these boxes?!"

"They're eggs. Aqua crawler eggs, to be precise."

"Aqua crawlers?" she repeated.

"These are monsters from the Western Continent. They're quite similar to caterpillars but live underwater."

"C-Caterpillars..." Misha said, retreating away from the boxes.

I smiled at the gesture. "In the west, people treat them as pests for eating the medicinal herbs that grow in lakes. Under the best circumstances, aqua crawlers can produce fine thread. Fabric made from that thread is what we call aqua silk."

"Aqua silk?! That legendary fabric whose fabrication method is completely unknown? My dad said you could only find it inside

dungeons on rare occasions!"

"That very fabric, indeed. The conditions needed for aqua crawlers to weave thread are quite specific. I only know of them because I've read about it in an ancient text."

"Is that true?!"

When I lived in the Kingdom of Haldoria, I'd found this information in an ancient document kept in the underground restricted library of the palace. At the time, I'd been looking for a new business idea and read through the entire thing dutifully.

After getting over her initial shock, Misha asked, "But Miss Ellie... While I understand that aqua silk is a high-class product, is there really a need for you to go to Sarjas?"

She wasn't wrong. I did not need to do this personally, but I wanted to be there to ensure this new venture would succeed.

"Part of the reason is that aqua crawlers are hard to care for... The truth is that this is a necessary step to achieve my objective."

"You mean taking revenge on the kingdom?"

"Yes. Aqua silk is not just some expensive fabric. Processing it through alchemy can transform it into sturdy protective gear or magic items. The most skilled artisans and alchemists are all dying to get their hands on this material. They'd leave behind their nations in a heartbeat to obtain it. Merchants will likely gather once they hear about this lost material resurfacing."

"And that's an attack on the kingdom?" asked Misha, baffled.

"It is," I answered. "Misha, do you know how to estimate the strength of a country?"

"The strength of a country? Well... I suppose that's decided by their army's size and national budget, right?"

"Exactly. And those who influence these two figures are its people. Military power is nothing but the sum of money and human resources. A country's strength is its talented people, so I'll draw the kingdom's finest artisans and merchants out of the nation by using aqua silk as bait. Haldoria already suffers from a lack of talent, which I know shall drive the nail in the coffin."

As I explained to Misha how to get aqua crawlers to produce aqua silk, we finally saw our first stop in the distance. Gana, Traitre's production base, was a village on the edge of Lebrick County.

"It's been a while, Miss Ellie."

“It has, Mayor.”

Just as we arrived, Misha and I went to the firm’s office in the center of the village to meet with the mayor and the executive in charge of the production base. This place had suffered some setbacks when workers ordered goods during the conflict, but the production of cosmetics was now back on track.

“Mayor, how is life and work? Are there any issues you’d like to share with me?” I asked.

“None at all. We’re all glad to have a stable income thanks to the jobs you gave us. We’re also thankful you sent guards to protect the village.”

In the wake of the conflict, I’d gone to Cedric and purchased a few slaves that had received training in combat to protect this place. They mostly took care of the monsters in the vicinity. Like Misha, I intended to free them after a few years if they worked diligently. Those who wished for it would then become regular Traitre employees.

“Are you getting along well with the guards?”

“Wonderfully! They’re very kind people.”

“Is that so?”

I’d picked people with a strong spirit of cooperation rather than extraordinary fighters. Fortunately, they seemed to be on good terms with the villagers.

Then, I nodded at the mayor, then turned to the executive I’d sent here to gather information.

“And how is production going?” I asked them. “Have you encountered issues?”

“No issues to date,” said the executive. “If you’re looking to increase production further, I fear this village’s resources won’t be enough anymore.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Our sales are rapidly growing, and I want to expand the number of branches. I have no doubt the demand will grow even further. As you said, I’ll have to think of developing more production bases like this village. When the time comes, I’ll need someone with the proper expertise at the center of the new project. I might have one of our employees working here take charge. To prepare for that eventuality, I want you to emphasize training the recent hires even more thoroughly. I’ll add that into the budget, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Understood, miss. I’ll make sure it’s done.”

Afterward, I went to hear from the villagers and people we'd hired from the area. I inspected the cosmetics workshop. By the time I ended, the sun had already set, and the mayor invited us to his place for the night. The mayor's house doubled as an assembly hall and inn, meaning it was much larger than the others. When we got there, his wife and daughter had finished preparing dinner.

We sat around a large table, and the mayor's wife set a large pot in the middle. Their daughter then filled each of our bowls.

"Dig in," she said. "I hope you don't mind rural cuisine. It is a dish from the region."

"Thank you for the food," I said.

"Thank you very much," added Misha.

They'd simmered mushrooms, wild plants, and other ingredients you could find in the mountains together.

"The mushrooms are very juicy," I noted.

"Yes, it's delicious," continued Misha.

This dish was not fancy, but it was nutritious and had a gentle taste that merged various ingredients perfectly, bringing out the best of them. Even Misha, who had difficulty handling heat, was gobbling down her bowl, blowing on each spoonful energetically.

The following morning, I sat down with the chief of the guard—who'd been patrolling diligently until the late hours of the night—and the slaves who worked here for a talk. I checked the inventories to see if anything was running low. Before noon, Misha and I finally departed again.

We took turns driving the carriage and reached Broccen Fortress after two days. Nowadays, this fortress served as a checkpoint to enter the empire's new region of Sarjas.

As we got closer, two guards crossed their spears to block our way.

"Halt! Are you peddlers? Don't you know that you need authorization to go through here?!"

"I'm a merchant, not a peddler," I said. "And I have my permit right here."

I showed them a pass signed by Lucas as well as my new guild card, which showed I was a Special License holder. Most such inspections were a walk in the park for those with privileges like mine.

"We've confirmed your authorization," said the man. "What are

you carrying?"

"Aqua crawler eggs," I said. "They're monsters."

"You're transporting monster eggs?"

"Indeed, I am. Misha."

"Yes, miss."

The guards looked somewhat suspicious, so I had Misha show them the documents I had entrusted to her earlier.

"This is my possession permit," I explained. "The next page is an approval form allowing me to bring those eggs into the Sarjas region."

"R-Right," stuttered the guard after reading through the papers and checking that the crates had been properly sealed.

"Security was awfully tight," said Misha after they allowed us to pass.

"This area was at war not so long ago," I responded. "And Sarjas has just joined the empire. There may be terrorists and anti-imperialist forces lurking, and they have to be careful with who goes in and out of the region. Did you see how tense the guards were?"

"Yes, they seemed on edge."

"To be honest, I think they seemed a little *too* tense," I said, then focused on the map to check the way to the village while Misha held the reins.

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"Phew," the guard sighed as he watched the carriage disappear in the distance. "They're finally gone."

The man in charge of the checkpoint at Broccen Fortress felt all the tension leave his body.

"That's the Silver Witch of Traitre?" his partner asked.

"Yeah. I was in the army before I got dispatched here and took part in the conflict in Sarjas. Back then, I saw her in person and can a hundred percent say it was her."

Two women, or rather two young girls, had just gone by the checkpoint. At first, the guard had been worried about them. But when he saw the pass and guild card, he'd recognized the fearful merchant who'd led the volunteer army in Sarjas.

"Is she really such a big deal?"

"She's beyond anything you can imagine. I don't know how she

did it, but she fired countless spells of different attributes, one after the other. I was outside the fortress, encircling it with the rest of the army, still able to see her tornadoes and stone pillars crush countless soldiers to death."

"Seriously?"

"She even used some sort of ice spell to turn the enemy lines into a silver hell... After we took the fortress, I saw these men trapped in the ice. There were so many of them I still dream about them sometimes..."

"So that's why they call her the Silver Witch..."

"Yeah. Apparently, she's also pretty close to Count Lucas. If you get on her bad side...your head will roll. Whether she does it or he does."

"G-Got it..."

The guards ended their chatting on that note and returned to their posts.

◇

Roughly one day after entering the Sarjas region, we strayed away from the well-maintained road leading to the former capital, steering the carriage onto a beaten path surrounded by trees. After a while, a shabby wooden fence came into view, and beyond it was a village.

"Is that the village we're looking for?" asked Misha.

"Indeed," I answered. "This is Milista."

Milista, which wasn't home to any particular business or industry, bordered a large, beautiful lake. Its people lived off the little farming, hunting, and fishing they did.

I'd discovered this place while looking for a suitable habitat for my aqua crawlers. After my employees visited several times to exchange with the villagers, they'd eventually agreed to work for me and produce aqua silk.

Misha steered the carriage toward the village, but I felt something was amiss.

"Something is off..." I said.

"I feel it too," agreed Misha. "The air is...tense."

We were about to reach the village's gate when five men, armed with crudely made wooden spears, suddenly jumped out of the shadows. I jumped out of the carriage and over Misha's head,

then took out my blade.

"What is going on?" I asked, positioning myself in front of the carriage.

"A woman?!" exclaimed one of the men, appearing surprised.

"Y-You're not one of those bandits?" inquired another.

"A bandit? Far from it," I said. "I'm a merchant. The mayor should be expecting me—I'm from Traitre."

"From Traitre? Lower your weapons, men! She's not one of 'em! She's the guest the mayor told us to welcome!" A man with a limp who seemed to be the leader convinced the others to stand down and turned to me. "Sorry, we heard about you. I'll lead you to the mayor. Follow me."

Misha and I parked the carriage and followed him on foot to the mayor's house. Only men were in the streets, holding spears and wearing grim expressions.

"Did something happen?" I asked. "You mentioned bandits earlier."

"We have a bit of a problem. Come, the mayor will explain," he said, opening the door. "Gramps! That merchant lady is here!"

"Hello, forgive my intrusion," I said, following him inside.

"Pardon me," said Misha.

The mayor was inside, leaning over a table with a few other elderly villagers who all seemed troubled.

"The merchant...? Ah! You're from Traitre, aren't you? I'm so sorry to tell you after such a long trip, but misfortune has befallen our village."

"Could you tell me what exactly seems to be the problem? I'd love to help," I said.

"Well... I don't believe a young lady like you could do much..."

"Mayor, there's no harm in telling her, is there? Besides, now that she is here..." trailed off another villager.

"Fine..."

That last push was enough for the mayor to finally explain the situation. As it turned out, bandits had unexpectedly attacked the village yesterday. They'd killed the gatekeeper and taken away all the alcohol and food they could find. Before leaving, the bandits had told the villagers they'd return the following day—today—for the girls. By the looks of it, their attack the previous day had been to scout the village and ascertain its military power. With that information in hand, they could move to plunder and kidnap

however they liked. This location was remote and only had so many routes the villagers could use to send word to an Adventurers' Guild for help. In all likelihood, the bandits had set up lookouts there to prevent that, meaning they'd seen Misha and me arrive.

The mayor apologized profusely for getting us mixed up in their problems, but I assured him everything was all right.

"Miss Ellie, what's the difference between brigands and bandits?" asked Misha.

"Well, there are no clear definitions. As a general rule, people identify brigands as those who attack travelers on the road to take away their belongings, their money, or sometimes even their lives. These men usually work in groups of four or five—on rare occasions, twenty at most. Bandits form larger organizations." The mayor nodded as I explained. "In most cases, they not only pillage but also work as hit men and kidnap people who they later sell as illegal slaves. Criminal syndicates that flourish in larger cities or corrupt nobles are connected to these organizations. The largest of these groups can have hundreds of members."

All in all, banditry was much more wicked.

"They're well equipped, nothing like mere brigands," the mayor added. "Our gatekeeper was getting older, but he was a former adventurer. We wouldn't stand a chance if they were strong enough to kill him. There is an aviary on the edge of the village. Hide there. When the bandits come, run into the forest and don't look back. You might get away if you take advantage of the chaos. I can't guarantee you'll make it, but staying here will be much worse."

"There is no need," I answered, keeping my tone calm and reassuring him. "I shall get rid of that bandit group for you."

"G-Get rid of them?! Don't be unreasonable; there's no—" The mayor tried to stop me, but I snapped my fingers, interrupting him. Sharp ice thorns immediately sprang up around me.

The people in the room all shrieked.

"Wh-What are those?!"

I snapped my fingers once more, and the ice disappeared. Regardless, I didn't need to snap them to cast my magic. It was all for show.

"Y-You're a magician, missy?!"

"And you didn't even chant, did you?!"

I waited for the uproar to subside before saying, "As you can see, I'm much stronger than most people. We travel alone because

we can hold our own in a fight. So please, won't you trust me to take care of this matter?"

All the villagers exchanged glances, but they agreed. I had the mayor gather those who could fight and deploy them in key areas around the village. Then, I gave them some of my equipment and whistles we obtained from the other villagers. If bandits showed up, they would use them to signal me.

Trees surrounded the village in the north and south while the lake was west. As for the gate, it stood on the eastern side. I had the villagers split into three groups, having the first two groups watch the north and south while I remained near the gate. The last group would protect the warehouse in the center of the village where the women, children, and elderly would hide.

The day before, the bandits had shown up just past noon. We didn't have long to prepare if they struck around the same time today. As I looked at the villagers running around frantically to get into position, I called for Misha.

"Misha, please protect the warehouse."

"I will!"

"And if the bandits split into two groups and attack from two different sides, follow the whistles and help the villagers."

"Understood," she said with a tinge of nervousness.

While she was still young, she had trained tirelessly since joining us and had shown me that she could manage just fine while fighting those thugs last time. Mireille had personally taught her the basics, and she'd even learned some skills. She would be far more effective in a fight than your average villager, whose fighting experience most likely involved fending off a couple of goblins.

I only had one worry: brigands had killed Misha's parents. While she had overcome this traumatic event, I had no way of knowing how she'd react when faced with similar opponents. So, I decided to tell her one last thing.

"Misha, I want you to protect the villagers. Don't forget that, ultimately, *your* life matters the most. Run away if you end up battling someone you can't beat. That's an order."

"O-Okay."

"This is a perilous mission, but I'm counting on you. We must destroy these bandits here."

"We must?" she asked.

"Yes." I lowered my voice before continuing. "Because they're

deserters from the Sarjan army."

"Huh?!" exclaimed Misha.

"Considering the time and place, that is very likely."

"But I thought the Sarjan soldiers wouldn't be held responsible for what happened."

"While the empire brought this matter to a close after the king's suicide and the subsequent transfer of sovereignty, it doesn't mean that those who committed crimes won't face consequences. The soldiers who plundered villages or assaulted civilians are being put on trial and punished. The deserters must have known they wouldn't get away with what they did during the war," I said quietly. "I theorize they teamed up with local brigands to form a bandit organization. If the villagers learn of this, their image of the empire might worsen. It could very well affect Traitre's relationship with this village in the future, and we cannot have that."

"But the ones who started the war were the Sarjan, not the empire."

"Indeed. But the villagers won't care about that. At the end of the day, their village got attacked because their nation and the empire clashed. That fact is all that'll matter to them."

"I... I see..." said Misha, her ears and tail drooping sadly.

I patted her head gently before continuing, "That's why we must dispose of these bandits for good here and now. As it stands, the villagers shouldn't be too critical of the empire. I probably shouldn't be as blunt. Leaving aside large cities, the commoners of rural areas couldn't care less who sits on the throne. As long as the taxes don't increase, leadership changes are none of their concern. Besides, the empire has experience integrating territories seamlessly. The government made up a reason to exempt the new Sarjas region from taxes for a year to win over the locals."

At the moment, most Sarjan were satisfied with the empire's goodwill. I couldn't let this incident ruin things.

"As such, I'm counting on you, Misha."

"Leave it to me, Miss Ellie!"

After I sent Misha to the warehouse in the center of the village, I headed to the entrance to wait for the bandits. If they intended to kidnap the women and plunder on a large scale, they'd need carriages or wagons. This meant their main force would most likely come from the east.

The man with a limp remained next to me and asked me,

“Missy, are you sure about this?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“If you say so. You know... I retired because of an injury, but I’m still a former Rank D adventurer. If things go sour, I’ll buy you enough time to run away.”

“My, how reliable,” I said, smiling.

Just as I responded, a group of men with a wagon appeared on the horizon.

“It looks like our guests are here,” I noted.

“Hi there, folks!” yelled a bandit from afar. “I hope you readied our prize!” The others snickered as he rode ahead of the wagon. “Oh, and a merchant arrived this morning, right? You’d better hand over their merchandise!”

The man with the limp—Aldo, as I recalled—clenched his teeth as he glared at the bandits. I glanced at him before stepping forward.

“Wow! Pretty girl you got here! So, what’s a beauty like you doing in the countrysi—”

Just as the bandit approached and tried to put his hand on my shoulder, it flew before it touched me.

“Huh?!” blurted the man.

That ended up being his last word.

The other bandits screamed and stared in shock as I sliced their comrade’s body into pieces. I used Quick Motion to dive into their midst while they stayed frozen in place. My blade’s first slash killed two of them. Another bandit tried to draw his sword in a hurry to protect himself, but I cut right through the metal and into his flesh.

“You bitch!” yet another bandit screamed, bringing down his sword on me.

I used the back of my left hand to redirect the trajectory of his attack. He missed me, and I trampled on his blade before cutting off his head. Seeing that I’d slain four of their comrades in the blink of an eye, the men around the wagon took out their bows. They tried to nock their arrows as fast as possible but were too slow. I kicked off the ground strongly enough to crack it under my steps and lunged at them, sending them off to the other side before they even aimed their arrowheads my way. At the same time, I cast Ice Thorns and pierced through another few of them.

“EEEEK!!!”

“SH-SHE’S A MONSTER!!!”

“That’s rude,” I said.

How dare he call me a monster? I froze the one who had insulted me with my ice and kicked him, shattering his body. One of the bandits had fallen on his backside out of fear. The ice lumps hit him in the head, causing him to lose consciousness. I decided to keep him and a couple of others alive, then massacred those I didn’t need.

“That should do the trick,” I said.

“S-Seriously…?” Aldo let out.

He looked as though he didn’t know whether he was awake or dreaming as he walked through the corpses.

“Mr. Aldo,” I said. “Would you mind helping me tie up the ones I kept alive? We shall need them to discover the location of their hideout and gather information on their comrades.”

“S-Sure.”

These men had most likely intended to tie up the women they would kidnap, as we found cloth and ropes inside their wagon. I borrowed these supplies and handed half of them to Aldo. We were halfway through the work when I heard high-pitched whistles.

“The whistles!” exclaimed Aldo.

“It appears the bandits split into two groups. I’ll leave the rest to you, Mr. Aldo,” I said. “If some of them resist, you may go ahead and kill them.”

“I’ll also— No, I got it. Please protect the villagers.”

Aldo almost said he’d accompany me, but he held himself back. I nodded at him and dashed toward the source of the whistle.

◆

Misha remained at the center of the village to protect the nonfighters at Ellie’s orders. As she listened to the commotion of the battle near the village’s entrance, she felt her body tense up. She didn’t know how many bandits had attacked, but she couldn’t fathom the incredible Ellie losing to them.

Ellie and Mireille trained the slave girl often, though she was helpless against them. As far as Misha was concerned, the probability of the bandits defeating Ellie and getting to the warehouse was near zero.

As the noise from the east diminished, whistles rang near the forest, and Misha felt the tension return. It was the signal the

villagers had agreed upon; a second offensive had come from another direction.

She gripped the handle of her dagger several times to confirm it was still attached safely to her waist, then looked in the direction of the high-pitched sounds.

"I'll go to them!" she exclaimed. "Please take care of this place!"

"W-Wait, girly!"

"It's too dangerous!"

Some villagers tried to stop Misha, but she paid them no mind and started running toward the forest. She used the thick vegetation at the edge of the forest to conceal her presence as she looked for the enemies. Before long, she spotted three bandits facing a group of five villagers.

The village men held the same impromptu crafted spears she'd seen before. They anxiously pointed them at the bandits, hoping to keep them in check. Yet the ruffians simply sneered as the cowardly villagers left them unfazed.

Misha hid behind a tree. The bandits were still looking at the villagers, not having noticed her at all.

"They have no idea I'm here..." she whispered. "In that case..."

She took a deep breath to steady herself, crouching and activating a strengthening skill to increase her physical abilities before leaping out of the shadow. Misha used to only know how to strengthen her entire body. But she had learned how to control the flow of her mana much more precisely, thanks to Ellie and Mireille's guidance. She could now strengthen any body part of her choosing at will.

With her legs enhanced, Misha's speed increased greatly, and she flew toward the bandits like an arrow. She had selected her first target—the neck of the man holding a bow. She held the dagger she'd received from Ellie in an underhand grip as she covered the last few meters with a single jump.

But the bandits finally realized someone was approaching. Ordinary bandits wouldn't have been able to do much more than scream as they had their throats slit open. As Ellie had guessed, these men were former soldiers trained in the art of combat. The man she aimed at reflexively raised his bow to protect his neck, blocking Misha's dagger.

"Urgh!"

Misha twisted her body in midair, unwilling to show her back to them. She used one hand to push against the ground and swiftly got onto her feet, wielding her dagger with the opposite hand.

"What the hell?"

"That's a kid! Wait, is she a beastkin?!"

The bandits raised their weapons and spread out, moving to surround Misha. Yet the catkin followed every motion with her eyes until she froze when her gaze stopped on one of their faces. Memories of her past flooded her mind. She remembered how the horse had reared up after being hit by an arrow and how her father had immediately drawn his sword, jumping out of the wagon. Meanwhile, her mother had pulled her behind herself, hiding Misha's body with hers. She felt as though she could still see her father kneeling in a puddle of his own blood, clinging to the brigands to slow them down. Her mother carried her and rode bareback, ignoring the vicious slashes that cut open her back.

She didn't think of these moments as often these days but hadn't forgotten a thing and recognized this face. The man her father had desperately clung to so he wouldn't catch up to his fleeing wife and daughter was right there, in front of her.

Misha felt her blood boil in her veins. Suddenly, the world went silent. Her field of vision narrowed as a bloodred filter seemed to taint it.

"AAAAAAAAH!!!" she screamed.

Not bothering to close the distance carefully before attacking, Misha poured everything into strengthening her body and lunged at her enemy. While her target could not react in time, the man beside him—a former soldier in all likelihood—struck the catkin to stop her. Misha promptly switched to a defensive stance and kicked the floor to regain her balance before striking with her dagger. Even so, her opponent calmly bent over to dodge before swinging his fist again. This time, it connected with Misha's stomach, and the light catkin flew back.

"Argh!" she groaned.

The man laughed. "Pretty intense, kid. She seemed out to get your head. Did ya do anything to her?"

"How should I know? Wait... A few years back, I attacked a catkin family. The mom and kid got away, though. Hey! You that kid?!"

Her eyes still trained on the surprised bandit, Misha fought a fit

of nausea. She slowly got back up and tried to determine the damage she'd received. Thanks to her strengthening skill, her bones were all intact.

The sudden encounter with her parents' murderer had made her blood rush to her head. She fiercely attempted to suppress the urge to jump at him right this instant.

Uncaring of her struggle, the bandits started chatting.

"She's a tad too scrawny, but her face isn't bad, is it?"

"What the heck? You're into that kid?!"

"So what? I didn't get to do her mom, so I might as well take the chance. Y'all don't mind if I have her, right?"

"Have at it, you sick bastard."

The group erupted in laughter.

Misha's injuries weren't all that bad. Controlling the rage and hatred that surged within herself at the man's approach was a much greater ordeal. To shake herself out of it, she focused on more precious memories. She thought of her father, who had taught her the joy of traveling and how to wield a blade, and of her mother, who used to help her study and teach her cooking.

Even once Misha was alone, she'd felt blessed with wonderful encounters. Such people included Cedric, who'd been kind enough to buy her for such a high price that she could repay all of her debts at once; the helpful slaves whom she'd met in his service and who'd taught her so much; Mireille, who'd trained her in combat and diligently taught her how to be a good attendant; Lunoa, who hadn't hesitated to become her friend despite their difference in status; and Ellie, the one who'd given her a new place where she could belong and who cherished her with no regard about her being a slave.

While a fire still burned in her chest, Misha finally regained her composure. The red filter that tainted her vision gradually disappeared as she started registering the surrounding noises again.

"I shouldn't rush. Calm down. Think," she told herself. The first thing that came to her mind after she'd cooled off was Mireille's teachings.

Both were practicing at the training area of Ellie's residence. They finished working on Misha's basics for the day and moved on to mana control.

"Listen closely, Misha," started Mireille. "Most beastkin struggle

with magic. But that does not mean they aren't capable of using mana. You can strengthen your body with mana just fine, right?"

"Yes," replied Misha. "I'm not quite sure how I'm doing it."

"I assumed as much. In fact, your way of strengthening your body and how Miss Ellie or I do so are different."

"Are they?!"

"Miss Ellie and I use magic to achieve that result. Beastkin instinctively use skills instead."

"What is the difference?"

"Magic is a process that is based on theoretical understanding and formulas. While skills also call for mana, they're techniques that do not rely on strict formulas but directly on sensations."

"Although beastkin aren't good at comprehending magic formulas, they can still use skills... Is that it?"

"Yes, let me show you something," said Mireille, handing Misha a pebble before taking a few steps back. "Throw that stone at me."

"O-Okay."

Misha hesitated before complying and hurling the stone at Mireille with an extended arm motion.

"Huh?!" exclaimed the catkin, surprised as she watched the stone pass through Mireille's body without hitting her and fall to the ground a little farther away.

Mireille disappeared, merging with the air like she was melting into it. Almost immediately, she reappeared in the same way.

"This is a skill called Mirage Step," she said.

"Amazing! Can I do that too?!"

"Well...to learn Mirage Step, one must have an affinity for light attribute magic. Let us check what attribute you have, Misha, shall we?" Mireille took out a small crystal. "Take this and let your mana flow into it, just as you would if you wanted to turn on the light of a magic item. That will tell us what we want to know."

"All right."

Misha took the crystal from Mireille and poured mana into it. The crystal turned light brown.

"You have an affinity for earth attribute magic," concluded Mireille.

"I can't use Mirage Step, then..."

The catkin looked dejected, and Mireille gently patted her head.

"Don't be so down," she said. "There are powerful earth attribute skills too. Besides, there are also plenty of useful

nonattribute skills that anyone can learn. I can teach you one that is very similar to Mirage Step."

The man's crude laughter roused Misha out of her trance.

"Be good and follow me, kid!" he said, extending his arm to grab Misha's own.

But his hand only grasped the air, having missed the catkin's arm by a few centimeters.

"Huh?" he let out, puzzled.

He tried repeatedly but could not so much as graze Misha. A layer of mana wrapped her body, and her elusive, almost whimsical motions allowed her to elude every new attempt. The man could not aim well because of the strange flickers of mana she was emitting. She'd learned this skill, Fake Step, from Mireille.

Even as Misha followed the bandit's movements with her eyes, she focused on her technique.

"Ha ha ha!" cackled one of his comrades. "Can't even catch a staggering kid?"

"Shut it!"

His comrade's laughter enraged him, making him give up on trying to catch Misha and swing his sword at her instead. His attack was off, and he missed as Misha curled up and sneaked under his legs to evade him.

He groaned as he lost his balance. The catkin took advantage of this opportunity to cut his thigh with her dagger. She struck a major blood vessel, successfully wounding him badly and taking away his mobility, just like Mireille had taught her.

"You bitch!" roared the man, his face red with anger as he raised his sword high above his head.

Misha almost stepped back reflexively but contracted her abdomen and braced herself instead. She kept her eyes wide open, not flinching even as the sword approached her face, and held her breath. She used the pommel of her dagger to strike the center of the bandit's blade, misdirecting his hit.

"Power Slash!"

Her next move was a simple skill that would enhance the power of her next slash, swinging her mana-imbued dagger with everything she had as she turned her body and fully rotated. By the time her tail, which lagged, had returned to its initial position, the man's guts decorated the ground.

“Urgh... Ah...”

Blood gushed out with the force of a waterfall, making the man collapse.

“I... I did it!” shouted Misha.

“Damn brat!” she heard one of his comrades scream.

Misha turned to see swords approaching dangerously fast.

The villagers stepped in before she could fall prey to their surprise attack. They charged recklessly, pointing their shabby spears forward. While their offensive was clumsy, it was enough to make the bandits, who hadn’t seen it coming, falter for a moment.

“Tsk! What a pain!” yelped a bandit, groaning as the villagers emitted battle cries.

Although the bandits received light wounds, their shock had passed as the villagers couldn’t measure up to them in strength or equipment. Realizing they still had the upper hand, the bandits regained their bearing.

“Damn you!”

“Die!”

Each villager shrieked as the two men lunged at them. Misha rushed to help them, but she did not make it in time. Just as one of the bandits’ blades was about to reach them, a shadow ran past them as swiftly as a gust. In its wake, the first man’s head rolled to the ground as the other found himself trapped in an ice crystal.

Then, surprised screams erupted from the villagers. Misha instantly rushed toward the fleeting shadow.

“Miss Ellie!”

“You did well, Misha,” praised Ellie, stroking Misha’s hair gently as her gaze fell to the bodies on the ground. “Well, now is the time to get the location of their base out of the remaining ones.”

Ellie instructed the villagers to remain on their guards and returned to the village’s entrance to interrogate her prisoners.

◇

After I disposed of the last bandits that Misha and the villagers had fought to buy me time, I returned to the east of the village with Misha. As we walked, I listened to her account. It surprised me to hear that a bandit she’d faced was part of the group of brigands

who had attacked her and her parents in the past. The man had most likely joined the former soldiers after the war.

I considered sending Misha to the warehouse. Even though she was slightly agitated, she didn't appear to have lost sight of herself, so I had her accompany me.

"Mr. Aldo."

"Oh, you're back!"

"Everything is fine over there," I informed him. "Some villagers were hurt, but they will be all right."

"I see," said Aldo, relaxing his shoulders as the tension left him.

"All that's left is to discover their hideout's location," I added. "Misha, I'm about to teach you how to conduct a proper interrogation. If it becomes too much, let me know at any time."

"Yes, Miss Ellie."

I approached the prisoners. A few seemed to have already woken up as they twitched at my footsteps. And so, I randomly picked two and dragged them away so the others couldn't see us anymore. I got them to sit facing one another, then took out my dagger. Upon doing that, I grabbed one by the hair and thrust my weapon into one of his eyes.

"AAAAARGH!!!"

I clung to the screaming man's hair and brought his face closer to the other bandit. He looked away, keeping his face down.

"Mr. Aldo," I said. "Could you please make him face me?"

Aldo paused before saying, "G-Got it..." and did as I asked.

The bandit groaned as he received his battering but still refused to look my way. I kicked him in the stomach.

"The next time you look away, you're taking his place," I said before plunging my blade into the other man's face again and again.

"See, Misha? When you have several prisoners at your disposal, the first step is to pick one grunt and rough him up before killing him. By doing so, you can get the others to understand that you will not stop at anything. Should they try to speak while you're doing this, ignore them."

"I understand."

I dug my blade deeply into the man's gushing wounds and wiggled it, then cut off his ears and tore off his nails. For the entire process, the bandit screamed the position of their hideout and detailed information on his organization. But I paid him no mind and moved on to cutting off his fingers. When he finally stopped

screaming, I slit his throat, letting the blood splash over the other man, whose face had gone pale. I let go of the corpse and grabbed the other bandit by the hair, forcing him to look up at me until I dug my dagger into his right eye.

He wailed.

"Now then, would you like to tell me what you know?"

"I-I'll speak! I'll tell you everything!"

"As you can see, the second target will naturally become more inclined to tell you the truth. Then, by repeating this process with a few more pairs, you can make sure they haven't agreed on a fake story beforehand, and you'll gather reliable intelligence. Always remember, Misha, the trick is to remain as detached as possible."

"O-Okay."

Aldo looked perfectly fine, probably thanks to his time as an adventurer, even if Misha's skin grew dull. She hadn't vomited or lost consciousness, so I continued. I questioned the man and got all of the information I needed out of him. Eventually, I did the same thing to a few more bandits to ascertain the veracity of it.

"So they're hiding inside a cave deep in the forest and have seventeen more comrades. Apparently, they aren't holding anyone captive at this time. What should we do, Miss Ellie?" Misha asked.

"Let me think... Well, we cannot allow them to roam free. It might be time for a little eradication trip."

"Y-You aren't gonna go right now, are you, missy?!" questioned Aldo.

"I am. If we take too long, they'll notice their friends were defeated and might run away. Thankfully, their hideout doesn't seem too far away," I said.

"B-But..."

"Please stay here to protect the village, Mr. Aldo," I interjected. "Let's go, Misha."

"Yes, Miss Ellie."

I entered the forest with Misha to hunt down the last bandits. We ran toward the heart of the forest, where the cave was supposed to be. Only seventeen people would be there, with no hostages in the way.

Misha and I ran up the mountainous trail, dodging the trees. I glanced behind occasionally to check on Misha, but she was not lagging. She'd always been nimble, and her mastery of strengthening skills helped her enhance her speed further. I was

close to my full speed, yet she followed me without issues. We started encountering more and more boulders before exiting the thick vegetation to enter an open area. According to the intelligence I'd gathered, the cave should be nearby.

Without a word, I raised my hand. Misha stopped in her tracks and immediately hid behind a tree.

"Wait for me here. And keep an ear out for any whistles from the village."

"Got it!"

"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Mammon," I chanted.

I exchanged the sword I'd been using so far for Flügel before poking my head out from behind the tree and looking. Two bandits were in front of the cave, a bored look on their faces. One was sitting while the other leaned on a large boulder. Both were engrossed in chat, and I failed to see the point of posting lookouts if that was how they acted.

"Ice Arrow."

The sharp arrow I released pierced through the standing man's skull.

"That's two," I said, brandishing Flügel and cutting the second man's body in half as he gawked at his dead comrade in shock.

I waited for a few moments, but no one had noticed anything. After making sure no one would come, I stepped into the cave. The entrance looked devoid of human presence, although it became obvious that people had settled here after a few more steps. Still, it couldn't have been long since the bandits had settled here. They'd only set up some doors and a few candlesticks here and there.

Once I finished, I moved forward and ensured my footsteps were as light as possible. I stopped when, near a corner, I felt the presence of people and concealed my breathing as I hid in a dimly lit corner. Two bandits appeared and walked past me. They seemed relaxed, not having noticed my intrusion or the deaths of the lookouts. I assumed they were on their way to relieve them.

A quiet gasp escaped one bandit's lips as I sneaked up on him, pressing my palm against his mouth and slicing open his carotid artery. The other's eyes barely had time to widen in surprise before I thrust my blade up his chin.

"That's four," I whispered.

I hid the bodies in a corner where the light of the candles did not reach, and I kept moving. Sometime later, I reached a simple

man-made door—with wooden planks attached. Even without opening it, I could see through the gaps. Five men sat at a table, drinking and eating while playing cards.

"Damn! How did I lose *again*?"

"Ha ha ha! My bad, dude!"

"That settles it. You'll be on watch duty when the others come back with the girls."

"Hey... Didn't it suddenly get colder?"

"Mmm? Actually, now that you mention it..."

"Brrr! It's so cold! What the hell?"

"I'll go check the weather," one of them said, standing up.

A strange noise, as if something had ripped off, echoed.

"Huh?"

The bandit looked down at the table, where his arms were frozen and stuck to the wood.

He screamed in horror. "Wh-What the... What the hell?!"

But the man tripped and fell to the ground, his body shattering into countless ice shards.

The others screamed and whimpered as their bodies gradually froze. Before long, they became still. Silence returned to the room before the shattering of human ice sculptures disrupted the eerie atmosphere.

"Nine."

I left the door behind and continued my exploration, diving deeper into the cave. At that moment, I stumbled upon a clumsily built prison. Just as the bandits I'd captured had told me, there were no prisoners. Recent bloodstains remained all over the handcuffs and on a large wooden plank, which I assumed had been used to carry out the corpses.

While I inspected the makeshift jail, a group of four men walked in from another door than the one I'd used. They started as they saw me.

"Wh-Who the hell are you?!"

"An intruder!"

"You bitch!"

One of them opened his mouth to yell but I threw a knife at his throat, shutting him up. Another tried to draw his sword, and I sliced him open along with the man next to him, who was just staring at me wide-eyed.

"Damn you!" swore the last bandit. He groaned as I grabbed his

throat and slammed him against the wall.

He tried his hardest to get my hand off, though I'd strengthened my body with my magic. Thus, he was powerless to stop me as I crushed his throat.

"Thirteen."

I opened the door they'd come from and soon found myself in front of yet another door. I peeked through the gaps and saw two men. One was gulping down alcohol while the other slept in a hammock. I kicked the door open and lifted one hand, pointing it at the drunkard. He just looked at me dumbfounded.

There were about five meters between me and my targets.

"Ice Slash," I chanted.

A gleaming ice blade flew at my enemies, cutting them in half one after the other.

"Fifteen... I'm still two men short."

When I reached the innermost part of their hideout, I had yet to find all of the bandits. I'd kept an eye out for hidden passages on the way, and I didn't think I'd missed any.

Right as I exited the cave to look around, I saw Misha stab a man—a bandit by the looks of it—in the neck. Another was dead at her feet.

"And that makes seventeen," I said.

We dragged the bodies of the fifteen men I'd killed next to the two that Misha had slain. We burned them before retrieving all the stolen goods that were in the cave. In such cases, the law recognized people who defeated bandits as the new owners of the loot. I'd later give Misha half of the money I made selling those.

"Looks like we're done here, Miss Ellie," said Misha.

"We sure are. Good work, Misha. All that's left is to tidy up," I stated. "Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub."

I concentrated my mana in my left hand, and the blue grimoire materialized.

"Earth Eater," I chanted.

One of the spells recorded in my Grimoire of Beelzebub activated. A thunderous roar echoed as the cave the bandits had turned into their hideout collapsed onto itself and disappeared, swallowed by the earth, leaving no trace. With that, ill-intentioned criminals or monsters would never use this place again.

I let my grimoire vanish and rotated my shoulder with a deep sigh.

“All done,” I said. “Let’s go back, Misha.”

“Yes, miss!”

The following day, the villagers held a banquet in our honor for ridding them of the bandits. While the people of Milista were not wealthy, they still treated us to a feast and even opened their best bottles of alcohol for us. We thanked them and accepted their goodwill.

“Mayor,” I said, eventually. “If that’s all right with you, I would love to discuss the matter I raised in my letters.”

“Why, yes! You wished to raise bugs called aqua crawlers in the lake, did you not? I’ve already selected the people who’ll care for them!”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. I shall teach the caretakers how to proceed in detail starting tomorrow.”

During the next few days, I instructed the villagers on how to breed and raise aqua crawlers. I also seized that time to install magic defenses and build watchtowers around the village. After all, I needed to make sure the village would not suffer from any attacks ever again. I also planned on purchasing a few more guards from Cedric.

After a couple of months of settling all kinds of issues and making sure Milista would be fine, the time for Misha and me to return to the capital came.

“Thank you for everything, Mayor,” I said.

“I should thank you. Without the two of you, this place would have fallen into the hands of the bandits.”

“I’m glad we made it in time to help you. As soon as we’re back in the capital, I shall send some employees and guards to keep Milista safe, so please treat them well.”

“Truly, we couldn’t be more thankful for everything you do.”

“Don’t mention it. Well then, let us meet again one day.”

“Farewell, miss.”

I shook hands with the mayor, then sat inside the carriage and told Misha to drive away.

◇◆☆◆◇

The city of Milista was far away from the heart

of the dukedom. Still, it flourished just as much as the capital.

I entered the large city surrounded by defensive walls as tall as ten adult men and bordered by a beautiful lake with my worn-out weapons and equipment.

As an adventurer and a writer, I'd visited hundreds of places throughout the Central Continent. None came close to gathering as many experts and craftsmen as Milista. It very much deserved its reputation as the city of artisans and alchemists.

While Milista used to be a small countryside village with no industry to speak of, the aqua silk the Silver Witch introduced drew countless talented artisans and alchemists to the area. As such, the items they created attracted merchants, turning Milista into the booming city it is known as nowadays.

I had heard rumors, but the townscape filled with workshops and alchemy ateliers made me feel like I'd entered a futuristic world.

Apprentice artisans and novice alchemists put up booths on the plaza where they sold robes and underarmor made of aqua silk as well as magic items for cheap. I was looking at the goods as I walked around when a high-spirited vendor, also a young weaver in the making, stopped me to show me her creations. Apparently, she could only sell products her mentor had approved. I could tell the quality was rather high. She encouraged me to check out a handkerchief she'd made from aqua silk. I'd never touched anything as soft in my entire life, as if the fabric was water itself, somehow forced into a shape. From what I gathered, this particular silk was a lot cheaper than the one most other shops used, even if it was still a hefty price. Still, the vendor's pitch—she assured me there was no better present for my lover waiting for me at home—compelled me to buy it. I

did not have a lover but her speech reminded me of my childhood friend. Right then and there, I decided to pause my adventures and go home so I could propose to her. The aqua silk handkerchief in hand, I thought about her and about how long I'd made her wait.

Excerpt from the preface of *Broken Hearts and New Departures*, volume 6 of *The Continental Chronicles of Zangurt Irsalis*.

Chapter 3: Labyrinth

After leaving Milista, Misha and I made our way home to the capital. Without the aqua crawler eggs weighing the carriage down, we moved faster.

Misha was driving, reins in hand. The battle in Milista had been tough on her in many ways, but I believed she'd taken a good step forward. We'd encountered monsters a few times already, and I'd seen a clear difference in how she carried herself and used her skills. When I first met Misha at Cedric's shop, she had been barely strong enough to protect herself. She was now at the level where she could become a bodyguard with no issue.

We camped out for a night before arriving at the Broccen Fortress checkpoint. Since we weren't carrying any merchandise, the guards allowed us in easily this time.

I switched places with Misha so she could have some rest, and I had been driving for a short while when we ran past a carriage coming from the opposite direction.

"Merchants?" wondered Misha, poking her face out of the carriage to take a better look.

"They must be off to conduct business in Sarjas," I said. "Most merchants hesitated to venture into the new region in the aftermath of the conflict, but trade has risen in the last month. The revitalization of Sarjas's economy means more clients for us, so we should rejoice."

As a country, Sarjas had relied heavily on tourism. If the imperial nobles took a liking to Sarjas and brought their patronage, there would be business opportunities. Stabilizing the production of aqua silk on top of that would lead to significant profits for Traitre.

"Touristic areas are perfect for selling cosmetics. What would you think about releasing exclusive fragrances and packaging in popular areas?"

"That's a great idea, Misha. Let's keep this in mind and estimate the cost when we get back."

I wrote down her suggestion. Once we returned, I would also

have to start working on acquiring other production bases besides Gana. Considering my forecast for the next few years, it was already a little late.

This time, too, Misha and I stopped by Gana. I got a report on the latest development, and we spent the night there before getting back on the road. I had been away from the capital for a long time and had to return as soon as possible. Still, while I felt it was high time to resume my duties, I wasn't worried about my company. I'd left it in Mireille's capable hands, after all.

Misha and I continued to take turns driving until we finally saw the imperial capital in the distance a little before noon.

It had been a long trip, but I was already thinking about my next one. Although I would stay in the capital for a while to get things running, I'd need to make an appearance in Lebrick County afterward.

Traitre was growing larger and larger. Even though our influence and revenue had shot up, my work had also doubled. I needed more people I could trust with important decisions, or I'd soon find myself unable to deal with everything. I was considering the matter when Misha pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Hmm... Miss Ellie?"

"Mm? What is it?"

"Well... The capital... It looks strange."

"Does it?"

I joined Misha in the driver's seat to get a better look at the capital.

"Something *is* off," I stated, focusing on the gate.

The imperial capital was by far the largest city in the empire. Dozens of carriages usually lined up at the gate, full of merchants and adventurers seeking entry into the city. However, only a few carriages were there today. The large gate that was normally open during the day was closed. I could see a couple of guards discussing something with the occupants of the carriages lining up. After a few moments, all of them but one departed, and the guards opened the gate briefly and let a lone carriage enter the city.

"Something must have happened," Misha said.

"Without a doubt. Please hurry the horses along," I ordered.

"Yes!"

I heard her whip cut through the air as we gained speed.

"Halt!" exclaimed a guard as we approached the gate.

“Is something wrong?” asked Misha.

The man nodded, a grave look on his face. “Do you live in the capital?”

“Yes, we’re merchants based in the capital,” I said, showing him my guild card.

“I see. A disease of unknown origins is spreading in the capital, so we are restricting entry and exit. As inhabitants of the capital, you may enter, but you will not be allowed to leave until further notice.”

“An epidemic?!”

“We cannot say whether this will turn into a full-blown epidemic. We have many casualties to mourn already... So, what will you do? Do you still want to enter the city?”

“Yes, I do,” I said immediately. “Misha, what about—”

“I’m coming too!”

I caressed Misha’s hair and signed the form the guard had handed me.

The city was silent as the dead, making the usual hustle and bustle seem like a lie. We hurried to the border of the noble district, where my residence was, and immediately started looking for Mireille. The first person we ran into was a recently hired maid, though. She was carrying a bucket full of water and running through the corridors.

“Miss Ellie!” she exclaimed upon seeing me. “You’re back!”

“I am. Where are Mireille and Arnaud?” I asked.

“Well...”

“Mireille!” I all but screamed, rushing into the room without bothering to knock.

Mireille lay on a bed, her breathing ragged, and I could tell she was in pain. Lunoa was on the bed beside hers, not appearing to fare much better.

“Mireille! Lunoa!” I called out, running to their bedside.

Neither of them answered me.

“Miss Ellie, please calm down.”

“B-But—”

“Miss Ellie! If you keep raising your voice here, they won’t be able to rest properly.”

“Y-You’re right... Indeed. Thank you, Misha.”

I left the room quietly and had Arnaud give me a full report on what had happened in my absence. Aside from Mireille and Lunoa, many of our employees and members of their families were sick.

“What is the government doing about this?” I asked.

“They put the city on lockdown. This area, in particular, is under strict control because the ratio of sick people is higher than anywhere else. They’ve also ordered people not to consume anything other than the food and water provided by the authorities.”

“The food and water?” repeated Misha, surprised.

“Some believe that illnesses are spread through contaminated food and water,” I responded. “Other theories blame animals or bad air.”

“Indeed,” confirmed Arnaud. “Animals and air cannot be removed or controlled as easily. Still, infection rates have indeed decreased since the authorities started distributing food and water.”

“I see. Thank you, Arnaud. You may go back to work.”

“Then please excuse me, miss.”

After I listened to his report, I started thinking about ways to improve our situation while checking the documents piled up on my desk. But I was so impatient to find a solution that I could not devise any. The guard had said that many had died already. If I did nothing, Mireille and Lunoa would soon...

“Ah!”

I’d squeezed my fountain pen so tight that a crack had appeared along the side. That finally made me realize how shaken I was.

“I need to snap out of it,” I said.

And so I sighed deeply and focused on calming down. When I was ready, I reached for the drawer to take out a new pen but a knock on the door demanded my attention. I told them to come in, and Misha’s head poked through the door.

“Miss Ellie, a guest for you.”

“A guest?” I asked. *At such a time?!*

“A messenger from the guild.”

“From the Merchants’ Guild?”

“Yes.”

This had to be about this illness.

“Show them in,” I said.

A while later, Misha returned with a man wearing the guild’s uniform.

“I apologize for my sudden visit, Miss Leis,” he said. “I have a letter for you from Grand Master Albert Guide.”

“I shall read it at once,” I answered, receiving the letter.

The first thing I noticed was the seal of the Merchants’ Guild, showing it was an official message. I took out a paper knife and opened it, reading its contents.

“An urgent summons...” I said.

The guild generally never summoned members unilaterally like this because the executives of the Merchants’ Guild treated those in the organization as their equals. Executives did not hold a position of power over any of us; we worked together and enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. There were a few exceptions, though. A state of emergency motivated by a crisis threatening the empire was one such exception. If a situation met certain conditions, the guild could exercise a right to command its members. Refusing these orders without good cause led to penalties —sometimes fines and outright expulsion from the guild. In his letter, the grand master had made it clear the situation met all the conditions. I couldn’t ignore him.

“Misha, the grand master requires my presence, so we’re heading out.”

“O-Okay!”

“We have a carriage ready for you, miss,” said the messenger from the guild.

Misha and I followed him outside and boarded the carriage.

“What could they need you for?” asked Misha.

“It must have to do with the epidemic. I assume they might need me because I can use water magic.”

I explained to Misha that water created from magic was safe to drink. There was no doubt that the mages of the palace produced the water the imperial government was currently distributing.

“I see...” she said. “Huh? Miss! W-We just went past the Merchants’ Guild’s building, didn’t we?!”

“We did. If we continue down this path...we’ll reach the Commoners’ Assembly?”

The Commoners’ Assembly, as its name suggested, consisted of commoners. They discussed policies and came up with law proposals and appeals. After they passed through this first chamber, the Imperial Assembly, an assembly composed entirely of nobles, examined the proposals. The Commoners’ Assembly headquarters was in the same district as most guilds.

Just as I’d predicted, the carriage came to a stop in front of the Commoners’ Assembly headquarters. The man led us inside and brought us to a room in the deepest part of the building.

“I’m afraid only you are allowed inside, Miss Leis,” said the man.

“All right. Misha, wait for me here.”

“Yes.”

I pushed the door open and stepped in.

I gasped.

Within the large meeting room were only important figures of the empire. I recognized Count Guide—the grand master of the Merchants’ Guild—the guild master of the Adventurers’ Guild, representatives of several other guilds, several deputies of the Commoners’ Assembly, and a handful of nobles who occupied functions in the imperial government. Some Rank A adventurers—including Elsa—sat on the lower seats.

Sitting right across from the door in the seat of honor was someone I recognized—the crown prince of the Yutear Empire, His Highness Prince Okyst Yutear. We’d exchanged greetings several times when I still lived in the kingdom, so he most likely knew who I was. As a prince involved in government affairs, he’d probably heard the entire story about my escape and arrival in the empire. The question was, how would he treat me?

“Thank you for joining us, Ellie Leis of the Traitre Commercial Firm,” he said. “I’m Okyst Yutear, the crown prince of the empire.”

He was pretending we were meeting for the very first time, huh?

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Highness,” I said, playing along. “I’m Ellie Leis, chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm.”

“I hope you’ll forgive me for summoning you so rudely,” he

continued. “Come, come, take a seat.”

“Thank you,” I said, sitting beside Elsa.

“Now, then. I suppose I should tell you why I summoned you here. The situation is dire so I’ll be blunt. I heard your Divine Artifact allows you to store large quantities of goods. Is that true?”

“It is, Your Highness.”

So he needed me for my Grimoire of Mammon. I had used it quite openly during the border conflict and wasn’t all that surprised the information had reached him.

Prince Okyst nodded slowly and asked, “You’re aware of the grave crisis that threatens the capital, are you not?”

“I am. A mysterious illness that may very well turn into an epidemic appeared.”

“Well, there is more to this,” he said.

“What?!” I let out, astonished.

Prince Okyst warned me not to speak a word to anyone else before revealing, “The cause of this illness is none other than the appearance of a mutant king poison slime in the city’s underground waterworks.”

“A king poison slime...and a mutant variant at that?”

Slimes were weak monsters found virtually anywhere. Some related species, such as the Primordial Ooze populating the demon world, should not be underestimated. These monsters could adapt to almost any environment and evolved to develop better-suited characteristics.

Several slimes could merge to form stronger beings called big slimes or king slimes. As for poison slimes, they had become deadly poisonous by adapting to their environment. A king poison slime’s secretions were more than potent enough to kill people.

“A party of high-ranking adventurers slew the king poison slime,” continued the prince. “But it split into countless smaller slimes. Reliable adventurers are hunting them down as we speak. We’ve also mobilized all water and light magicians to produce and purify water. Though it was only a slime, if word that a strong monster appeared inside the capital spreads, panic will take over. We stopped the spread of the illness for now, so please refrain from telling anyone about this until we destroy every last poison slime.”

Prince Okyst paused and sipped his tea to moisten his throat before getting to the heart of the matter. “I’d like you to enter a dungeon.”

“May I ask you for more details, Your Highness?”

“Naturally. I need a party to enter a dungeon to retrieve the necessary catalyst to produce the antidote, a specific ore. King poison slimes aren’t so rare that their poison has no antidote. In fact, we have plenty of stock in the palace. However, we found that the poison of this mutant is slightly different. To neutralize it, magic water imbued with mana using emaya ore as the catalyst is required.”

“Emaya ore... From what I know, blacksmiths sometimes use that. But...” I trailed off.

“There are far cheaper, better alternatives, so no one has much in stock. The only place we could acquire large quantities of emaya ore from is the dungeon, a few days’ ride from here. Now, the problem is that most of our best adventurers are eliminating the poison slimes. The party will need to dive deep into the dangerous parts of the dungeon, but we are having trouble finding enough skilled members. Your name came up while we were discussing the matter. I’m told you’re a competent fighter, and your ability to transport considerable amounts of ore at once would make you a valuable asset.”

“So you’re asking me to enter the dungeon to gather emaya ore, correct?”

“Exactly. You will be amply compensated if you succeed. But dungeons are dangerous by nature. If you accept, you will risk your life. As such, I hereby swear that no punishment would befall you were you to refuse.”

Then, I closed my eyes and mentally sorted out all the new information I’d just received.

“I believe I understand the situation,” I said. “I do have two conditions, Your Highness.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“First of all, I’d like to request that my employees be prioritized when distributing the antidote.”

“That’s fine. Elsa here agreed to join the party under the same condition.”

I glanced at her, and she told me that Marty and Sarina were sick.

“And? What is the second condition?” inquired the prince.

“I request that a magic contract be drafted, stipulating that I have full ownership over the emaya ore we’ll find.”

“Miss Leis,” warned Count Guide, his sharp eyes staring into mine.

Prince Okyst waved his hand to dismiss him and said, “I wish to hear your reasoning.”

“It has to do with the limitations of my Divine Artifact,” I said. “I can indeed store great quantities of supplies inside my Grimoire of Mammon, but only if they belong to me. The ownership of the emaya ore must be clear if I’m to carry them out of the dungeon. Naturally, I shall give them up for free when we return to the capital.”

“I see. Fine. Guide.”

“I shall prepare the contract at once.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as the contract was signed, I returned to my residence with Misha to prepare for the journey.

“I’m not too knowledgeable about dungeons,” started Misha. “But aren’t they incredibly dangerous?”

“They are quite dangerous. But Mireille and Lunoa’s lives are in danger. I must procure this ore; I have no choice.”

“That’s true, but…”

Misha looked conflicted.

“You don’t approve of Prince Okyst’s methods,” I said.

“I don’t… He said you were free to refuse, but he knows you cannot with Miss Mireille and Miss Lunoa’s lives at stake!”

“Indeed. I’d go as far as to surmise that he summoned me *because* he knew that people close to me were sick.”

“How could he?!” she exclaimed, her hair standing on end.

I extended my hand and stroked her soft ears gently.

“That is how rulers must think,” I said. “A saint would be of no use in politics. One must be ready to use anything and anyone to protect their nation. Besides, I’m now an imperial subject. The prince could have ordered me to go, even against my will. Seeing that he gave me the right to refuse is more than enough consideration.”

He would have found another way to pressure me if I’d said no. I supposed his second step would have been to give me a direct order and threaten me with prison if I still refused. In such situations, accepting readily and trying to earn his gratitude made a lot more sense. Plus, I needed the antidote.

“You’ll remain here and watch over Mireille and Lunoa, Misha.”

“But—”

“No buts. Dungeons are full of peril. I may not be able to protect you if you follow me. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Elsa is a renowned adventurer and she’ll be right by my side.”

“All right…”

Misha still looked worried, so I soothed her as well as I could while preparing quickly. Once I finished, I headed to the gate. Transport would be determined by the price, but I’d brought everything I needed—including consumables—from the firm’s storage. I’d send the bill to the imperial family at a later date.

“This way, Ellie!” a voice called when I got off my carriage close to the gate.

“Elsa!”

The two of us chatted as we walked to the gate. The prince must have already reached out to the guards, because they let us out without issues. Outside the city, we saw the prince, Count Guide, and others present at the meeting.

“Weren’t they supposed to arrange transportation?” Elsa asked me, looking around.

There were only a few carts to carry goods but no carriages or covered wagons, which we’d need for such a long trip.

“We should ask,” I answered.

“Right.”

We walked up to Count Guide, who was talking to Sergio, the guild master of the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Lord Guide, Mr. Sergio, we were told means of transportation would be available. Where might they be?” I asked.

“And weren’t more adventurers supposed to join us?” added Elsa.

“Well, there is one more.”

“Only one more adventurer?” Elsa retorted, surprised.

“That’s right. But don’t fret. She’s only one step away from becoming a Rank S adventurer,” said Sergio with a smirk as though he’d just given us the best present.

Rank S adventurers were the cream of the crop, even stronger than the famed Rank A adventurers. They were almost heroes. At the moment, only seven people had received that honor. Each of them was powerful enough to influence the fate of an entire nation by themselves. If someone close to their level joined us, there would be no point complaining about the numbers.

“Where is she?” mused Elsa.

“Looks like she just got here,” Sergio said.

I looked around but couldn’t identify anyone who fit the bill. Elsa seemed just as confused. Suddenly, the area grew darker. We looked above and saw a large shadow looming over us.

“Wh-What?!”

“Huh?”

A gust of wind hit us. That’s when I realized that the shadow was flapping its wings.

“A thunderbird?!”

Thunderbirds were mighty monsters several times bigger than humans that could call forth thunderclouds. They were so powerful that not even wyverns dared fly too close to them. Somehow, such a fearsome being landed peacefully right next to us. I looked at its paw, and the proof that tamers left on the beasts they’d subjugated was right there. The monster was also holding a large wooden crate, which it then deposited on the ground as a small girl jumped off its back.

“I’m sorry for the wait,” said the girl. “I gathered all the emaya ore I could from nearby villages and cities. This should help while we procure more.”

She was truly small, only reaching to about my chest, and had long dark hair that fell to her waist. Her eyes, as black as the night sky, were full of vigor. She was carrying a gigantic battle-axe that clashed with her stature. I remembered her as a member of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council.

Sergio gave her a little push so she’d face us and said, “Let me introduce you. This is Yuuka Kusunoki, the Dark. She’s a Rank A adventurer and will be dungeon diving with you.”

She smiled at us and extended her hand. “I’m Yuuka Kusunoki. My name can be hard to say for the people of the empire, so you can just call me Yuu. I look forward to working with you.”

Yuuka Kusunoki, the Dark, was an adventurer and doctor who’d found her way to the empire some years ago after leaving her homeland, an eastern island. Another few years as an adventurer had been enough for her to pile up the achievements and rise to Rank A. She was also an incredible doctor, so good at her craft that even the emperor relied on her.

I’d thought the same thing when I laid eyes on her at the council’s meeting, but she did not look that strong. Well, that wasn’t

exactly true. I could tell at first glance that she was much stronger than the wannabe heroes you'd meet in taverns despite her not looking any older than twelve. Easterners and Southerners often had smaller builds and softer features than the people of the other continents. Even when I took that into account, Yuu was in a league of her own.

Elsa and I each shook her hand, then discussed the main concern.

"Miss Ellie, you brought the supplies and food, right? If we're all set, I suggest heading to the city that's closest to the dungeon today to enter tomorrow morning."

"That sounds good, but wasn't the dungeon supposed to be a few days away?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll have Orion carry us to get there before the sun sets," said Yuu, patting the gigantic bird's wing.

"Is this thunderbird your familiar?"

"Yes. I've been taking care of Orion since he was just an egg."

Yuu left the wooden crate she'd brought in Prince Okyst's care, and after a few verifications, the time to depart came.

We climbed onto Orion's back with Yuu. Even on the ground, he was a lot taller than a horse. The feathers on his back were also thick and soft, making him quite comfortable to ride and like hugging a high-quality carpet. After Yuu checked that Elsa and I were holding on properly, she picked up the reins.

"Miss Ellie, Miss Elsa, please attach this to your clothes," she said, handing us pegs. Cord pieces linked the pegs to the reins Yuu was holding. "The reins are a magic item imbued with space magic. Holding them or attaching a peg to yourself will let you maintain your current position in the space relative to Orion. I'm not sure how this all works, but I promise you won't fall as long as you keep these secured."

"Understood," I said.

Elsa and I attached the pegs to the edges of our clothes.

"Let's go, then."

Yuu moved the reins to signal her bird, who immediately spread his large wings and started flapping them. The wind blew all around him but did not reach the three of us. While it was only a theory, Orion appeared to prevent that from happening with his wind magic. I'd read papers that argued that the thunderbirds applied wind magic to call forth storm clouds and lightning.

Before long, I felt myself float gently. Orion picked up altitude while turning around in the sky. When he was high up enough, he flapped his wings and sped toward our destination.

At first, Elsa and I stayed frozen, our expressions stiff as we experienced heights we had never felt before—and probably never would have if it wasn't for Yuu. As we got used to the altitude, we appreciated the spectacular view, seeing we were almost as high as the clouds. With nothing obstructing our view, the scenery seemed to go on and on. In the distance, I could even see Lebrick County, and farther beyond, the royal castle of Haldoria.

Countless birds flew away once we approached a forest, probably spooked by Orion. The sun was past its zenith, and its rays reflected themselves on the river, creating a belt of light. A herd of kelpies swam leisurely in these glistening waters.

"This...is quite the sight," Elsa said.

"It is..."

For an instant, Elsa and I forgot about the tense situation in the capital. We let the grand, mysterious beauty of nature from above captivate us. I felt like the heroine of a fairy tale or an epic poem, flying across the sky on the back of a mighty bird. This whimsical time continued for a few more hours until we finally approached a small city as the sun started setting.

Orion began descending, spinning around as he adjusted to the new altitude and landed. We were finally back on firm ground after hours in the sky. Before we could jump off his back, a group of guards surrounded us, weapons in hand.

"Yuu? What should we—"

"It's all good! Everyone reacts like that at first. This is my fourth time receiving such a welcome today."

"Is that so..." I said, sighing deeply.

Apparently, she'd already traumatized three other places today. Elsa forced an awkward smile and told us she'd explain before jumping down and approaching the poor guards, who were ready to lay down their lives to ward off the thunderbird. Because Elsa smoothed things over, the guards calmed down and allowed us to enter the city. As for Orion, he flew away, disappearing in the night sky. When I asked Yuu about it, she told me that she couldn't get the stable to look after him like with other people's familiars because the workers tended to panic.

"I have a special contract with a stable in the capital, but there

is no other choice whenever we travel. He hides deep in a nearby wood or forest and tries not to stand out too much until I call him back. I use a flute to do that," she said, showing me the small flute she held.

It appeared to be a magic item.

"He's marked as a familiar, so he'll most likely be fine. But I believe you should warn the Adventurers' Guild about him so they can spread the word," I advised.

"You're right. Things might get heated if rumors about a thunderbird near this city start spreading. Besides, we need to buy information on the dungeon."

"Buy information?" I repeated, puzzled.

Elsa then spoke up. "I don't have much experience with dungeons, but Adventurers' Guilds always purchase and sell information on nearby dungeons. Intelligence on the exact location of unusual ore veins or rare medicinal herbs fetches a pretty penny. Most people keep the really good stuff for themselves, meaning we'll probably only be able to buy maps of the first few floors and information on the monsters and safety zones there."

"You're right," said Yuu. "Emaya ore isn't all that precious, so we might be able to learn where to mine some."

"Interesting... So that's how these things work."

Letting the two professional adventurers decide on our course of action was for the best. Once we passed through the city gate, we walked along the main street until we reached the Adventurers' Guild and stepped into the two-story wooden building. The reception desk was right in front of the entrance. The request board hanging on the right had numerous missions pinned on it. On the opposite side was a tavern where the adventurers could unwind after completing a commission or socialize on their days off. The place was boisterous, full of adventurers chattering as they drank alcohol.

They stared at our group curiously. I stopped looking around and tried to follow Yuu and Elsa to the reception desk when two men suddenly blocked our way. The bearkins' cheeks were red from drinking.

One of them hiccuped before saying, "You lost? This is the Adventurers' Guild, you know? Not some hangout for young ladies."

"Heh heh," the other laughed crudely. "Now that you girls are here, you might as well show us a good time. Come on, have a

drink with us."

"Adventurers like that really do exist..." I wondered aloud.

I was almost impressed. A few months ago, Lunoa had shown me a scene from a novel she was reading. The protagonist had beaten up some background characters that acted in the same manner—the best part of the book, according to her.

Yuu, who was walking in front, dismissed them with her hand. "Sorry, we're in a hurry. I know we look good but it's no reason to hit on us."

"Huh? What's up with you, short-stuff? We're not into kids, so you can scram."

"Yeah, outta the way. Come back in ten years."

The two drunkards brushed Yuu off to approach Elsa and me. Yuu froze, not moving a muscle.

"Elsa, how do you adventurers deal with men like them?" I asked.

In high society, it was important not to make waves. We handled such situations quietly and struck back later, using these pigs' poor conduct to threaten them.

"I'd say violence is the answer. People will look down on you if you're too nice."

"I see. Just like in the novel," I said. *Should I do this the adventurer way?*

"If you've got a commission, we'll take it on," one of the drunkards continued. "We'll even help you out for free if you follow us to our room for a bit."

"Our commission fees are expensive, you know?"

I glanced at their equipment, weapons, and general state, then waved my hand like I was trying to chase away a fly.

"Sorry, but I don't think the two of you are strong enough. Come back after training some more."

"What did you say, you bitch?!"

The bearkins' faces flushed even redder as they raised their fists at me. A few adventurers looked at us, and the receptionist had also noticed the altercation and called for a male employee. He came running at us, but before he could get there, I slammed my fist into the chest of one of the drunks. While the light armor he wore preserved his mobility, it was still made of iron. It was no match for me, though. The armor shattered under my fist as the two-meter-tall man flew through the air.

I'd done that thanks to the reinforcement spell I'd cast. Silent Casting was rare, and so was being able to reinforce a specific part of the body.

Since everyone around us had believed I'd be the one to get punched, they stared at me, flabbergasted.

Lunoa was right, I thought. *This is a most pleasant feeling.*

I resolved to recount this story to her after we acquired the emaya ore and returned to the capital.

"D-Damn you!" screamed the comrade of the bearkin I'd defeated, grabbing his sword.

The other bearkin hadn't taken his blade out of its scabbard. If he had done so, I'd technically be in a position where killing him was acceptable in the eyes of the law. He was drunk, but he still seemed to be aware enough not to cross that bridge.

He raised his sheathed sword, ready to strike, but it wouldn't budge no matter how hard he tried to swing it.

"Huh?"

He turned around to see what was happening and faced Yuu's radiant smile. She had grabbed the tip of his scabbard and wouldn't let go. The next moment, a shrill, metallic noise filled the room, and the short sword and its scabbard shattered in her hold as if it were as fragile as a twig. Yuu then grabbed the man's collar and slammed him into the wooden floor, which cracked as half of his body disappeared into it.

"I'm average sized in my country!" she puffed.

I'd met others from the same island as her, and I was almost sure she was on the small side, even by their standards. Naturally, I kept my mouth shut.

"W-Welcome. How may I help you?" asked the demon receptionist, her smile stiff. Two small horns decorated her forehead.

"We're planning to enter the dungeon to fulfill a request and are here for information," Elsa said. Her tone was even, and she pulled out her guild card as if nothing had happened.

"Thanks in advance!" exclaimed Yuu happily, handing the demon girl her card, appearing in a much better mood.

The receptionist glanced at them and gasped.

"What's wrong?" probed Elsa.

"N-N-Nothing! Excuse me!" she blurted, straining her posture.

For some reason, she was stealing glances at me.

"I'm just a merchant," I said. "Not an adventurer."

"O-Oh. My apologies."

"Ah, come to think of it, we also have a letter from our client," said Yuu, taking out an envelope and giving it to the flustered receptionist.

She gasped once more and only took one look at the letter, still stiff. It made sense that no one other than Yuu would casually take out a letter that bore the imperial crest.

"I-I-I don't think I'm qualified to help you! I'll show you to the drawing room, so please wait a moment!"

We followed her to a finely decorated drawing room that clashed with the rough image of the Adventurers' Guild.

"To think they had such a room," commented Elsa.

"There's one just like this in the capital's branch too," said Yuu.

"Is that so?"

"They mostly use it to welcome noblemen who come in with requests."

"Makes sense."

After a few minutes, someone knocked on the door, and an elderly man came in. He was past his prime, but he obviously still trained since his body was in great condition.

"Forgive me for the wait. I'm Bren, the guild master of the Adventurers' Guild of Dold. I've read His Highness's letter. Here is

all of the information we have on the dungeon."

Unlike noblemen, the guild master was very direct and immediately got to business. That went to prove he was an adventurer through and through.

Elsa took the documents from him and spread the pages on the table.

"Do you have anything on emaya ore?" she asked.

"We do. This ore isn't very sought after. Most people dive into dungeons looking for mithril or orichalcum, you see. Other types of ore are very unpopular."

"Very unpopular?"

"Compared to medicinal herbs or monster loot, ore is heavy. They're not worth mining except for a few rare and expensive ones."

"That stands to reason."

There was indeed a limit to how much one could carry out of a dungeon. The majority of adventurers would have no reason to mine inexpensive ore.

"The monsters all seem fairly average," said Yuu.

"Yeah. Although there are a lot of undead," related Elsa.

"That's true. I feel like there are more and more of them these days."

The guild master hummed, clearly interested in their conversation. And so, the three kept discussing the dungeon for a while longer.

◆

Today should have been a day like any other.

After dealing with the busiest hours of my shift in the morning and the paperwork of the adventurers who'd completed their missions in the afternoon, I bade farewell to my colleagues who finished work a bit earlier than me. I would handle the reception alone for a few more hours, but things were usually quiet at this time.

Dold was very close to a dungeon, so most of the requests we got were escort jobs or material collection quests. Many adventurers who dived into the dungeon during the day and returned in the evening had already arrived, pocketed their payment, and moved to

the tavern area to drink under the guise of celebrating their success.

It was the same as always.

The door suddenly creaked, and three women I'd never seen before walked in. The first one had unusual black hair and looked no older than twelve. Behind her were a young woman with fiery red hair, who carried herself with the air of an experienced adventurer, and a silver-haired woman who looked every bit like a highborn lady. Such was not the type of group you saw often so deep in the countryside.

I initially thought they were here to post a commission. But the black-haired and red-haired girls walked straight toward the reception desk, appearing used to visiting Adventurers' Guilds. The silver-haired girl looked around curiously. Was she the client? The other two could very well be her bodyguard and her young apprentice.

Just as I reached that conclusion, two drunk men hurriedly left the tavern area and pestered them.

These two are bad news, I thought. Both were top-class Rank B adventurers who were very good but were notorious for their heavy drinking and bad behavior around the ladies. The woman adventurers and staff members all hated them. I didn't want them to let them quarrel with newcomers, especially with that fancy young lady.

I slipped to the back and called for an ex-adventurer who now worked for the guild before returning to my spot. By the time he came out to mediate, the bearkin men were already raising their fists at the lady.

I gasped. Right as I was about to scream, the dainty lady punched one of the burly bearkins, sending him flying back.

"Huh?" I let out, my eyes widening in surprise.

Before I could recover from the shock, the small black-haired girl slammed the other man into the floor so fiercely that it cracked under him, and he sank deep into it.

"No way..."

Our guild's building was made of treant wood, a precious material that one could gather on the fourth floor of the dungeon. After the construction was completed, a mage had even reinforced the structure with magic, making it several times sturdier than stone! I couldn't believe a kid like her could destroy it like that!

The party of three ignored the shocked stares and walked up to

the reception desk...to me!

In hindsight, that was only natural since I was the only receptionist present.

"W-Welcome. How may I help you?" I blurted out.

"We're planning to enter the dungeon to fulfill a request and are here for information," the red-haired woman said, handing me her guild card in a practiced way—a most normal behavior for an adventurer.

"Thanks in advance!" exclaimed the black-haired kid, setting her card in front of me.

I looked at the cards, then my heart almost stopped. I gasped. Not only was the red-haired woman a Rank A adventurer...but so was that kid! That wasn't all! My eyes stopped on their incredibly famous names, Yuuka Kusunoki and Elsa Archfield, adventurers who'd earned themselves nicknames!

"What's wrong?"

"N-N-Nothing! Excuse me!"

While this city was next to a dungeon, this was the middle of nowhere! The nearby dungeon wasn't even all that impressive, with only thirty floors. It was nothing like the labyrinth cities, where multiple dungeons blended, or the humongous labyrinths found in the two-hundred-floored dungeons.

Rank A adventurers rarely ventured anywhere near Dold, so I couldn't help being stressed.

I looked at the silver-haired lady. Was she also a Rank A adventurer? That would explain how she'd sent that huge bearkin flying.

She most likely noticed me staring because she said, "I'm just a merchant. Not an adventurer."

"O-Oh. My apologies," I stuttered.

A merchant?! She had to be messing with me!

"Ah, come to think of it, we also have a letter from our client," said the black-haired girl—Yuuka the Dark—not giving me the time to get over my shock.

I took the envelope from her reflexively and once again gasped, astonished. Unless my memory was playing tricks on me, the crest on the wax was that of the imperial family! It had to be an incredibly serious matter!

"I-I-I don't think I'm qualified to help you! I'll show you to the drawing room, so please wait a moment!" I said, leading the group

to our finest drawing room.

Then, I immediately rushed to the guild master's office.

"Master! Guild Master!" I exclaimed, knocking on the door with all my strength.

Mr. Bren, the guild master, opened the door with a confused look. He was getting on in years but was still well-preserved, his strong build and vigor making him seem far younger.

"Why are you being so loud, Tina?!" he asked.

"S-Something huge happened! L-Look at this!" I answered, giving him the letter.

Mr. Bren frowned. "Calm down. Who brought this letter here?"

"Yuuka the Dark and Elsa the Phoenix! Oh, and a third girl! A powerful merchant."

"What could this all be about?" the guild master wondered aloud, cocking his head to the side.

He opened the envelope and read its contents. The more he read, the more serious his expression became.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"I showed them to the drawing room."

"All right. I'll head there immediately, so return to the reception desk. Make sure to warn the idiots in the tavern. No one's to mess with them."

"O-Okay!"

The letter must have been very serious for him to react this way. After all, the guild usually never intervened in conflicts between adventurers. We stepped in when they broke laws, leaving them to their own devices with little fights and altercations. I'd only tried to have someone mediate earlier because I hadn't been sure they were adventurers.

"This seems like a lot..." I whispered. *I hope I won't get mixed up with it.*

I returned to my workstation. I had to make my warning very clear. Though I didn't know what was happening, the imperial family was involved. I needed to ensure no problems occurred so the guild wouldn't be held responsible.

"Everyone!" I said loudly, banging the desk a few times with my fists to grab everyone's attention.

My hands hurt, but all eyes were on me.

"You've all seen the altercation a few minutes ago," I said, using the most threatening tone I could muster. "These three

women are Rank A adventurers, here to complete a very important quest. I ask that you refrain from interrupting their work in any way. The guild will harshly punish those who do not comply. Keep that in mind!"

Voices broke the silence all over the hall and tavern.

"Rank A? No way!"

"But those Rank B bearkins were done in!"

"They were drunk. They wouldn't have lost sober!"

"Hang on, hang on... That's it! I knew I'd seen her somewhere! The red-haired girl is Elsa the Phoenix!"

"Seriously?!"

"Then the two others must really be Rank A..."

"I have no clue who that silver-haired one is, but isn't the Dark known to have black hair and eyes?"

"The one with silver hair said she was a merchant, didn't she?"

I slammed my fist on the desk once more.

"Anyway!" I said, doing my utmost to sound scary. "You are not to mess with them! Behave for a few days, or else! Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-Yes..."

◆

Once we had all the information we needed from Bren, the three of us decided to find a lodging where we could rest. Despite the urgency, my desire to head to the dungeon immediately wasn't realistic. Emaya ore was in the innermost part of the sixteenth floor. Even if we did not investigate the upper floors and simply followed the shorter route to get there, it would take us several days. Yuu and Elsa had insisted that we take on the challenge at the top of our form, meaning I had no choice but to agree.

"Head to the Golden Wheat on the main street," said Bren as we were about to leave the guild. "Give them my name, and they'll give you one of the guild's regular rooms."

"Thanks," said Elsa.

"Yes, thank you very much," Yuu added.

"You've been a big help," I said.

The Golden Wheat was very close to the guild. Even as the sky was already dark and torches illuminated the path along the main street, the Golden Wheat was still bustling with activity. It was full

of overnight guests and visitors who'd gone to the inn to eat or drink.

"The place looks good," Elsa said.

"Agreed! The smell is divine too."

"That's true. We ought to thank the guild master."

A bell announced our arrival as we passed through the door.

"Welcome!" a middle-aged woman with broad shoulders exclaimed cheerfully.

"Hello. Bren, the Adventurers' Guild's guild master, referred us to this place..."

"Oh, that's you! I've heard already. He sent a messenger my way. Have you had dinner already?"

"Not yet. We'd love to."

"Sure thing. Go on. My husband is serving in the tavern, so order everything you like!"

The innkeeper urged us toward the tables. Around us, the guests, mostly young adventurers on their way back from their quests, were making merry, enjoying the alcohol and food. Yuu, Elsa, and I sat at the bar.

We suddenly heard loud cheers from a corner of the room, and I asked, "What could it be?"

"Some drinking competition, I'm sure," Elsa said. "Adventurers love their ale."

"Still, isn't it too noisy?"

We all focused on the area from which all the noise was coming.

"Daaaaamn! That's the fourth already!"

"Come on! We need another challenger!"

"Don't look at me! I'll lose for sure!"

There seemed to be a heavy drinker involved in the competition.

"HA HA HA HA!!! You're all so weak! I'm just getting started, you know?"

Right as I thought I'd heard that voice before, someone moved, and I caught a glimpse of a young woman. Her hair looked like so many golden threads.

"Huh? Miss Ellie! It's you, isn't it? It's been so long! Are you here on business?" effused the girl wearing a nun's habit, waving her hand at me.

She grabbed her bottle and skipped to us happily.

“It’s been a while...Tida,” I answered, somewhat put off by the alcohol-induced redness of her face.

I introduced her to my two companions, and we filled Tida in on the capital’s situation.

“Oh no! That’s terrible!” responded Tida.

“Indeed. That is why we are heading to the dungeon first thing tomorrow,” I said.

“I see... Well, I don’t think I could do anything to help, but you have my unwavering support!”

I was about to thank her when Yuu spoke up.

“Miss Tida, you’re a walking sister, aren’t you? Can you use healing magic?”

“Huh? I sure can. Light attribute healing spells are right up my alley.”

Most attributes had healing spells in their repertory but they all came with their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, the best detoxification spells were water attribute, while earth attribute healing spells usually dealt with continuous healing, and wind attribute healing magic produced effects on wide areas. The most powerful healing spells were all light attribute, though.

“And how are you at exorcism magic?”

“Pretty good. I’m a devout believer, see?”

“In that case, I have a request, Miss Tida. Would you agree to accompany us?”

“Huh?!”

“Yuu, stop it,” said Elsa.

“By the looks of it, Miss Tida seems strong. And remember what they told us at the guild. There are more undead monsters than ever inside the dungeon.”

“What Yuu said makes sense,” I agreed. “Exorcism magic is very effective on the undead.”

Undead monsters with physical bodies, like zombies and skeletons, were easy to handle. But those that did not have bodies, such as wraiths and ghosts, were another matter altogether. A light-magic user in our party would make all the difference in the world.

I could fill that role with my Grimoire of Beelzebub but had to preserve my mana if I wanted to bring out as much emaya ore as possible with my Grimoire of Mammon. Inviting Tida to join us was for the best.

“S-Sorry? Are you guys asking for real? We’re talking about a

dungeon! It's way too dan— Erm. I mean, I'm sure I'll hold you back!" Tida gestured with her hands as she spoke.

Tida was making a poor show of hiding her true feelings. I had seen her fight and knew she wouldn't hold us back.

"Don't be so modest," noted Elsa. "You train a lot, don't you? I can tell."

Tida averted her eyes.

If we want to get someone like her on board, there is only one way... "If you come with us," I started, "you shall be compensated appropriately."

I took out a small bag filled to the brim with gold coins, letting the coins clink, and set it on the bar. Shortly after, I loosened the string so she could have a look at the money.

"G-Gold coins..." whispered Tida, letting her hand reach for the bag. "N-No!" She stopped herself with her other hand and held it against her chest. "Gold coins are only worth anything if you're alive! Ah. Erm... I meant to say... M-My duty... Yes! My duty is to spread the love of God—I couldn't stray away from that noble path!"

She was doing her best to avoid staring at the gold.

Not even that approach worked.

Yuu's gaze fell on the bottle Tida was still holding.

"By the way, Miss Tida," Yuu said. "Are you fond of alcohol?"

"Huh? Well... The thing is... Alcohol is God's gift to us! So yes, I do like it."

"I see."

Yuu had reached some conclusion. She quietly put her hand into her tiny bag and, after a little digging, took out a bottle noticeably bigger than the bag.

"Oh! You've got a magic bag! Amazing! This is my first time seeing one!" exclaimed Tida.

Magic bags were magic items that could store items larger than they were. Few artisans were talented enough to craft them, almost all working for royal or influential noble families. Thus, they were incredibly difficult to obtain. In addition, the expensive materials and long work hours required made the few magic bags that ended up on the market sold for unbelievable prices. Even a bag that could only hold as much as a regular-sized carriage would cost enough to make me, a successful merchant, think long and hard about the purchase.

“Oh, this? I found it in some ruins! It’s got quite the capacity, so it really comes in handy.”

“You’re so lucky! You could sell it and spend the rest of your life taking it easy,” Tida said.

Yuu laughed. “I’m never letting go of such a treasure.”

She got four shot glasses and lifted the bottle she’d retrieved. The bottle had a clear liquid with leaves, roots, and seeds floating around. Yuu uncorked it, and a strange smell reminiscent of medicine wafted in the air.

“Here,” Yuu said, filling the shot glasses halfway and offering one to each of us.

“What’s that?” asked Tida, her brows furrowing from the smell.

I brought the glass to my nose. It was a peculiar mix of raw vegetation and strong alcohol.

“Is this some sort of spirit?” I asked. “It smells like a medicine…”

“Is it even safe to drink?” mused Elsa.

“Of course. Come on, give it a try,” Yuu insisted.

We warily brought the glasses to our lips and gasped in unison.

“Wow…”

“This is incredible,” I said. “The bitterness and the richness of the flavors intertwine in the most complex, satisfying way, yet it is surprisingly easy to drink.”

“Yeah,” Elsa agreed. “It’s…hard to describe. The taste is just so intense.”

Yuu listened to our feedback with a pleased grin on her face. Her chest puffed up with pride. “This is one of my creations, a medicinal brew. Pretty good, right?”

“It is!” Tida exclaimed. “Fantastic, even! I don’t think I’ve ever had the clear alcohol you used as a base either.”

“It originates from my home country. We make it using a cereal called rice,” explained Yuu proudly. She took out another bottle of the same beverage and set it down next to the bag of gold coins I’d offered to Tida. “I’m happy to gift you this bottle. If you help us, that is.”

“Urgh…” Tida groaned. Her eyes went from the bottle to the gold coins, then back to the bottle. “One more…”

Yuu took out a third bottle and set it down.

“I… I suppose I cannot abandon the poor souls suffering from that illness you spoke about. Our Lord must have led me to you.

Yes, this is all His will!" she said happily, stuffing the coins into her pocket and hugging the bottles.

"You sure are an interesting character, Tida," I said after a pause.

I made a mental note to get Yuu to sell me some of her medicinal brew once we returned to the capital.

We woke up early the following day, and after having a simple breakfast—milk and fruit—we left the inn.

"Tida, are you sure you'll be fine with your usual clothes?"

She was wearing the same nun habit she always had on. I suggested that we stop by the armor shop to purchase leather armor, but she refused.

"It's all good! This garment isn't just any old robe! It withstands not only magic and physical attacks but also the heat and cold!"

"Why so many enchantments?"

"The craftsman lost to me at cards and... Wait, no! So, hmm... The craftsman was very pious and offered to enchant my robes because he was...moved by my faith! Ha ha..."

Leaving Tida's story aside, her current equipment sounded better than some poor-quality armor.

We kept chatting as we walked out of the city. After a while, we reached a fence. Beyond it was a large metallic door that protected a rock with a crack that apparently led inside the dungeon.

As we got closer, we noticed a couple of guards standing beside the door. These people weren't here to stop others from entering the dungeon. Their job was to guarantee that no monster exited the dungeon and raise the alarm if anything of the sort happened.

One year ago, monsters had poured out of a Haldorian dungeon, causing significant damage. While dungeons were blessings and full of precious resources, they were also incredibly dangerous.

The guards already knew of our upcoming visit due to the guild master and did not question us at all. They let us through the impressive gate, and we approached the crack. A steep, winding road heading downward stood right ahead of us.

"All right. We're about to enter the dungeon, so check your equipment one last time," Elsa said.

We conducted a thorough inspection.

Elsa would be our leader for this mission. Tida and I weren't adventurers, never having stepped inside a dungeon. That meant

either Yuu or Elsa had to assume said leadership. At first, Elsa had recommended Yuu for the job, saying the strongest ought to lead. Yuu had refused and insisted that Elsa, who'd been an adventurer for far longer, was the best suited for the role.

I tightened the strap of my left gauntlet, verified that my dagger was in its usual spot, and took my sword out of its scabbard and inspected the blade. I wouldn't use Flügel today. Instead, I equipped a fine steel sword I'd purchased in the capital. I anticipated a dimly lit dungeon interior. If a monster suddenly came at me from my blind spot, I wanted to block it with my sword and had chosen it as such.

Elsa had also equipped a different sword than last time, it being lighter and easier to swing around. She was wearing leather armor reinforced with steel plates in critical areas.

Yuu carried her usual weapon, a battle-axe taller than her, on her back. She was taking smaller axes and broad-bladed knives out of her magic bag to check them all one by one. She wore a hakama —a jet-black robe, as dark as the night—over her traditional fighting gear from the east.

Tida was in her special nun habit and carried her usual iron staff. She didn't have much else with her, having left the precious bottles she'd received from Yuu at the inn.

Moreover, Elsa confirmed we were all ready before opening the map we'd gotten from the guild master.

"We need to go down to the sixteenth floor. The emaya ore deposit should be at the southernmost part of that floor. We'll ignore the monsters we cross paths with as much as possible and aim for the shortest path," she said, moving a finger over the map. "Our goal for today is to reach the seventh floor. We'll spend time in the safety zone right by the entrance."

She quickly briefed us on the exact locations of the safety zones on the first few floors, then reminded us of the specificities of the monsters we needed to look out for. We nodded and she put the map away.

"Off we go, then."

And so we stepped inside the dungeon.

◆

"Miss Mireille, Miss Lunoa, how are you feeling?" asked Misha,

carrying a pot of bread porridge into the room where Mireille and Lunoa rested.

A few hours after Ellie had left to secure the necessary ingredient to make more antidote, a package had arrived at Traitre's headquarters—antidote doses for Traitre employees and their families. Healers from the palace had even visited Ellie's residence once a day at Prince Okyst's command to help the patients recover.

Mireille and Lunoa had mostly recovered, thanks to the antidote and healing magic. According to the physician, a few more days of bed rest were all they needed to get back to normal.

At the moment, Arnaud took care of most of Ellie's and Mireille's duties and was constantly running around. Misha helped around the house in his stead.

"I've brought you food," she said. "It's hot, so please be careful."

"I apologize for the trouble, Misha," said Mireille.

"Thank you very much," replied Lunoa.

Misha set down the pot on the table. She scooped some porridge onto two small plates and handed them to Mireille and Lunoa.

"I wonder if Miss Ellie has reached the dungeon already..." mused Lunoa.

"If they had used carriages or horses, she wouldn't have. But they seem to have ridden on Yuuka Kusunoki's familiar, so who knows? They might be there already."

"That's possible. I heard that thunderbirds were incredibly fast," Misha said.

She poured glasses of water for the other two before recounting stories about thunderbirds she'd heard from the palace's healers.

◇

As far as appearances went, the inside of the dungeon looked every bit like a regular cavern to me. It was still easy to tell that we were inside one, though. While the cavern should have been pitch-black with no light source, we could still see our surroundings. The inside had dim light, and we should have proceeded with caution under normal circumstances. But we did not have time for that and advanced at full speed, following the map.

Occasionally, we ran into goblins and giant bats but ignored them, only bothering to defeat those that blocked our path forward.

Four hours later, we'd reached the third floor.

From the second floor onward, the narrow cavern widened as the ceiling rose. We were in an open area with good visibility—the perfect spot for a short break.

I drank from my water bladder and looked at the high ceiling above our heads.

"We didn't descend far enough for the ceiling to be that high, did we?" I asked.

"It's quite curious," agreed Tida. "Are all dungeons like that?"

"No, they're not," Elsa said. "We lump all kinds of places together under the name 'dungeon,' but there are several kinds. Some dungeons are regular caverns that monsters simply came to occupy, some are ancient ruins, and others are literal monsters called dungeon mimics. The dungeon mimics hold gigantic magic stones called dungeon cores."

"Space is very clearly warped here, so this is a dungeon mimic," added Yuu. "In other words, we're in the belly of the beast."

"Huh?! W-W-We are?!"

"A specificity of dungeon mimics is that treasure chests sometimes spawn. Oh, and corpses vanish all on their own."

"If we are inside a living being, as you said, I understand why dead monsters and adventurers get digested," I said. "But why would there be treasures inside a monster?"

"It's only a theory, but people say that dungeon mimics create them to lure people in," said Elsa.

"Oh my," I answered.

"Truly curious," mused Tida.

"All right, our break was long enough. Let's get going," Elsa said. "The stairs that lead down to the fourth floor shouldn't be far. Keep your guard up. The environment should change from the next floor onward."

"Understood. Let's go."

Right as we were about to depart, we felt a presence—several, actually.

I gasped, surprised, before stating, "We're surrounded."

"Kobolds," stated Elsa.

"Wh-What do we do?!" shrieked Tida.

"Get past them, obviously," proclaimed Yuu.

She reached within her magic bag and took out her red and white axes. The rest of us also readied our weapons.

"No need to wipe them all out," instructed Elsa. "Kill only the ones you need to and advance! Let's go!"

At her signal, we lunged forward.

"Gah!" groaned a monster, jumping at me with its battered sword raised high.

I pierced its throat and swiftly pulled my blade out, cutting off another kobold's legs with the same motion.

"EEK! How dare you target an envoy of the Lord?! Witness His might!" Tida smashed her iron staff into one of the kobolds' heads, splitting its skull in half.

"Nice, Tida! You're plenty strong! I guess I can entrust my back to you without worrying," Elsa said.

"No, no, no, I'm just a regular girl! Don't put me in the same boat as you two Rank A adventurers!"

"But you and Miss Ellie *are* strong," Yuu said. "How about you become adventurers too? I'll put in a good word for you."

"Thank you, but I'll pass," I answered. "I'm better suited to being a merchant."

"Out of the question! I like being alive!" shouted Tida.

"I think you're both suited for this, considering you can keep up with Yuu and me."

We broke out of the kobolds' encirclement while chatting away. Soon after, we spotted the stairs leading to the next floor and ran down.

For some reason, the monsters inside the dungeon mimic never approached the stairways. There could be exceptions, so we remained alert. As a general rule, the areas near the stairs were relatively safe.

The kobolds weren't chasing us anymore, so we stopped running and walked down the rest of the steps while steadying our breathing. As we reached the bottom, the light nearly blinded us. Even though we were still inside the dungeon, it was just as bright as a sunny day.

We arrived at the fourth floor.

"How...?" I whispered, looking around cautiously.

"What's going on?" exclaimed Tida.

Tida and I were both flabbergasted. We'd dived deeper underground, and yet we found ourselves faced with a large forest.

I knew this would happen based on the information we'd gotten, but I still couldn't hide my surprise. Above us, clouds were floating around as the sun shone brightly. I couldn't believe we were still inside a cavern.

"This...isn't the real sun, right?" asked Tida.

"According to dungeon researchers, dungeon mimics can create entire dimensions within themselves. Apparently, that is why you can find deserts, frozen plains, volcanoes, and even ancient cities in the large mazes that make up labyrinth cities."

"That's amazing," said Tida.

"I agree. I feel like I'm inside a fairy tale," I said.

After we marveled at the wonders of the dungeon for a few moments, we set out again toward the next floor.

A forest made up of gigantic trees entirely covered this floor. Their trunks were so thick that I couldn't have encircled one with my arms had I tried, which resulted in poor visibility. Monsters could surprise us, making us move slower than on the previous floors.

"There should be many monster species on this floor, according to our intel," Yuu said. "Goblins, kobolds, gray wolves, combat monkeys... Most of them move in groups."

"Let's hope they don't surround us again."

"Don't jinx us!"

"We're not here to pick medicinal herbs or hunt monsters, so let's just hurry on to the next floor. Luckily, the next stairway isn't far," Elsa said.

Indeed, after advancing cautiously for half an hour, we reached the stairs.

Our group ran into a herd of goblins, but they were fairly easy to handle for the four of us, and we dispatched them in the blink of an eye.

We walked down the flight of stairs, still inside a forest, until we came across a big rock. It had a large crack, so I took a look inside and found a stairway going up instead of down. I gazed at the rock again, which was only three meters tall with nothing atop it.

How strange, I couldn't help but think.

The fifth floor was a lot like the fourth. We applied the same strategy and headed toward our destination slowly, our senses on alert.

“Halt!” Elsa suddenly warned, keeping her voice quiet. She pointed at the bushes in front of us.

We glanced beyond the bushes and saw a group of burly monsters, each over two meters tall. Their heads very much resembled those of pigs.

“Orcs,” I whispered.

“They’ve got sensitive noses. We’re downwind, so they haven’t noticed us yet. If we keep moving, they will. And orcs are the persistent type. They’ll keep following us once they figure out we’re here…”

“Can’t we go around them?”

“That’d be a pretty big detour.”

“Let us force our way through,” I suggested. “Since they haven’t noticed us, this is our chance to surprise them.”

“W-We’re fighting orcs?” Tida asked.

“The stairs are fairly far on this floor. I’d rather we weren’t tailed by orcs the entire way,” said Elsa.

“That settles it, then.”

We hid in the thick bushes and approached, making sure to remain downwind. Just then, we looked at each other and jumped out at the same time.

The orcs let out surprised groans.

Without delay, I closed the distance that separated me from the first orc in one go and plunged my blade into its right eye. The point of my sword destroyed its brain, killing it on the spot.

Another orc roared, bringing down its club on me. I stepped back to dodge the attack and answered with a sharp slash, knowing I couldn’t slice off the orc’s arm in one go since I wasn’t using Flügel. But I could easily sever a finger. I got rid of its thumb, and the club fell to the ground as the orc stumbled forward. Upon doing so, I got in closer and plunged my blade into its chin upward. An orc’s skull was sturdy, so I had to find ways to deliver fatal wounds efficiently.

Yuu didn’t seem to have the same issue or mind the thick bones and muscles as she split an orc in half using her battle-axe. Elsa inflicted precise wounds to force the orc in front of her to kneel before swiftly slicing its throat. As for Tida, she was screaming and bashing an orc’s head in with her staff, using magic to reinforce her blows.

In the end, Yuu and Elsa killed three each, I killed two, and

Tida killed one.

"Phew. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Same here."

"Somehow."

"Good. More monsters will get here soon, attracted by the blood. We should move."

We departed immediately. Adventurers usually disposed of monster corpses so they would not attract more monsters. However, dungeon mimics eventually digested them, meaning we did not have to go out of our way to do so.

Trees also covered the sixth floor. The unchanging landscape gave me the illusion we were walking around endlessly in the same place.

"The scenery hasn't changed much, has it?" pointed out Tida. "It doesn't feel like we're getting any closer to our goal...which is somehow tiring me out even faster."

It looked like the monotony was getting to her too.

"There's a safety zone, a place that monsters can't access easily on the seventh floor. Once we get there, we'll stop for the day. Please do your best until then," Elsa encouraged Tida, a strained smile on her lips.

For all her complaining, Tida kept up with us and held her own during fights. Her light magic would tremendously help if any undead monsters showed up.

As we moved through the forest, Yuu picked up the fruits and flowers that caught her eye. I wondered what use she had for them.

"Ah! What a great find!" she exclaimed happily, picking up a fruit larger than her hands. We were in a hurry, so she never stopped walking and only picked up things.

From what I knew, whatever you took from dungeons reappeared in the same spot after a few days.

"Yuu, what fruit is that?" I asked.

"I've never seen anything like it," commented Tida. "Can we eat it?"

"This is a cacao pod," Yuu said. "These fruits are from the Southern Continent. They don't grow here because of the weather. They're not very good to eat, mostly sour. But if you dry them and let them ferment, you can use them to make medicine."

“Cacao...” I repeated.

I’d heard about it before. The pods were considered priceless treasures on the Southern Continent. Yuu mentioned that people ate the fruits raw or turned them into medicine. But I had a feeling I’d read something else about them in the old records of the Haldorian palace. I’d look into it once we were out of the dungeon. I could smell a great business opportunity.

We kept moving forward, stopping for an occasional short break and listening to Yuu’s explanations about the plants she found along the way. From time to time, we ran into monsters but handled them easily.

Suddenly, Elsa stopped.

“Duck!” she screamed.

I lowered my body by reflex. A thunderous roar sounded as something passed right above my head, destroying several trees in its wake.

“What was that?!” shrilled Tida.

“No way!” exclaimed Elsa.

“Now that’s a big one,” Yuu said calmly.

“This wasn’t in the documents we got,” I said.

Standing over five meters in front of us, a one-eyed giant wielded a stone bludgeon.

“That’s a cyclops,” stated Elsa.

“And it has no business showing up in such a small dungeon,” added Yuu.

“The stairway is behind it.”

“No other choice, then. We’ll need to defeat it.”

The monster brought its stone bludgeon down, and we jumped sideways to avoid it before assuming our fighting stances.

“I’m starting to really regret following you down here!” shouted Tida. “O God, lead your lost lambs! Flash!”

An intense light erupted from the tip of Tida’s staff, blinding the cyclops.

“Take this!” yelled Elsa, slashing at one of its legs. “Too shallow.” She saw that her blade wasn’t getting deeper than a superficial layer of skin.

“Elsa, pull back!” I warned her.

She immediately jumped back and watched, astonished, as the cyclops punched and sent me flying in her stead.

“Ellie?!” she cried out.

But the me she was looking at crumbled into pieces.

"I-Ice?" she let out, confused.

I'd used an Ice Doll to divert the monster's attention while I jumped onto its arm and ran up its body, slashing at its face.

"GRAAAAAH," the monster roared.

"Good going, Ellie!" Elsa exclaimed. "Power Slash!"

She took advantage of the cyclops's confusion to swing at its leg again. This time, she used a skill and strengthened her arms with mana to dig deep into its flesh with her blade.

The monster groaned and glared at Elsa.

At that moment, Tida aimed a light attribute spell, Light Halo, at the cyclops's eye, disrupting its focus. A small shadow then lunged at it from behind.

"Rupture."

The skill Yuu had just used tremendously increased the might of her battle-axe, and she cut the monster's back open.

It groaned in pain once more before bringing its bludgeon down in a fit of anger.

"O God, please bestow your divine protection upon us feeble creatures! Light Wall!" chanted Tida.

The stone weapon collided with the wall. I climbed onto its body once more and drove my rapier into its gums, letting it cut along the root of its sharp fangs.

Such pain was too much for the cyclops to bear, making it let go of its bludgeon and bring both hands to press on its mouth. Elsa thrust her blade into its chest to make it collapse, kicking up a cloud of dust as the ground shook under our feet.

"I-Is it dead?" asked Tida.

"Even cyclopes are no match against two Rank A adventurers. Especially not with you and me helping them, Tida."

"Quite right," noted Yuu. "Although, we wasted more time than I'd hoped on it."

"Yeah. Still, why was a cyclops here in the first place?" inquired Elsa.

"I don't know," I answered. "The information from the guild did not mention a cyclops living anywhere in the dungeon."

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Yuu.

Unease took over our party, but we walked down the stairs, finally reaching the seventh floor.

The forest continued onto this floor too. Near the entrance was

a rocky area monsters could only access with great difficulty. A monster-repelling barrier had also been set up in that place, making it a relatively safe resting spot.

"My..."

"Looks like we won't be alone."

A party of adventurers was already in the safety zone.

Tida and I knew nothing about dungeon etiquette, leaving things to Yuu and Elsa. As soon as we passed through the barrier and entered the safety zone, two members of the group that had preceded us, a swordsman and a woman who appeared to be a mage, walked toward us.

"The man seems to be the leader. He most likely brought a woman with him to avoid frightening us since our party consists entirely of women," explained Elsa quietly when I glanced her way.

The two stopped a few meters away from us.

"Hello. We're a Rank C adventurer party, Path of Light. Did you come from the lower floors?"

"No, we just got here from above."

"Huh?!"

The man and the woman looked at each other in surprise.

"Wh-What about the cyclops?! It was keeping guard right atop the stairs, wasn't it?!"

"We killed it."

"Y-You killed it?!" the man screamed.

The other members of Path of Light came running because of the commotion. I reached for my sword, just in case, but the party leader kept his friends in check.

"Calm down, guys!" he exclaimed before addressing us again. "Sorry. We don't want to pick a fight. We came to this dungeon to hunt for a few days. When we tried to leave, we ran into that giant and found ourselves stuck here."

"I see," Elsa said. "Well, we defeated the cyclops on the sixth floor, and there's no telling whether there are more on the other floors. Be careful on your way back."

"Yeah... Hmm... I don't mean to doubt you or anything, but...did you really kill it?"

"We did. Yuu."

"One sec!"

Yuu reached into her magic bag and pulled out the cyclops's ear —the proof we'd slain it.

“It’s a cyclops’s ear!”

“It was all true!”

“We can finally go home…”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

Killing a cyclops was entirely out of reach for a Rank C party. They’d have died without fail. Luckily, there was plenty of food in this dungeon, so they’d survived. They seemed to have been approaching their limit mentally, though.

“Thank you,” said the leader. “You saved our lives. Can I ask for your names if that’s all right? As far as I know, no one in Dold could defeat a cyclops. Are you from elsewhere?”

“I’m Elsa, a Rank A adventurer. We’re only teaming up temporarily, so our party doesn’t have a name, though.”

“I’m Yuuka, and I’m Rank A as well.”

“My name is Ellie,” I said. “I’m not an adventurer, just a merchant.”

“And I’m Tida. If you’re feeling thankful,” Tida said, making a circle with her fingers—the universal sign for money—“don’t hesitate to show it with more than words, if you catch my dr—Ouch!”

I smacked the back of her head to shut her up.

“Stop being so vulgar,” I said.

“You’re so mean!” whined Tida. “Asking for a proper reward is perfectly acceptable in these situations!”

“Is it…?”

I supposed it was customary for peddlers to offer payments to adventurers who assisted them if under attack on the road. Those who disregarded this unwritten rule faced criticism for their lack of manners. In a way, the current situation wasn’t so far off.

The leader of Path of Light seemed to agree with Tida.

“Of course! We have little cash right now, so would dungeon loot work for you? If you’d rather receive cash, we’d happily send some through the guild when we return.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Elsa. “We killed that thing because we needed to, not to help you. Not to mention, we’ll get a reward for having defeated a cyclops either way. You’re fine with that, Tida, right?”

“I guess so…”

“Are you sure? I’m not familiar with the rules, so I’ll leave the decision to you.”

“Had we saved a merchant, accepting the reward would have been perfectly appropriate, but we’re dealing with adventurers. While getting a reward for helping adventurers of a similar rank is all right, taking money from weaker adventurers, especially when they’re such polite people, is distasteful,” explained Yuu. “Of course, that doesn’t mean we must save every weaker adventurer we cross paths with unconditionally. It’s a bit like...volunteer work. You only do it if you feel like it!”

“Anyway, we won’t take anything from you,” concluded Elsa.

“Wait, *I’m* not okay with that. Let us repay you,” said the leader.

Elsa sighed. “All right then, I have a request for you. We were in a hurry and left the cyclops’s corpse as is. The dungeon will surely absorb it by tomorrow night, although it’d be a waste. Take its body apart and bring it to the guild. Oh, and you can keep ten percent of the money the guild gives you. That’ll be your payment for the labor you’re about to do.”

“Huh? W-Wait! We can’t take that too!”

“You should,” Elsa said. “If we leave it be, that money will just disappear. Just promise me one thing. When you rank up, help the newbies.” She turned to us. “Are you all right with this? Since I don’t need anything, you can split the rest.”

“I don’t need any money either,” said Yuu. “But I’d love to get my hands on the cyclops’s eye.” She turned to the leader of Path of Light. “Could you set it aside for me? I’ll give you a fitting container.”

“S-Sure. No problem.”

“It’s fine with me too,” I said. “Why don’t we give Tida the rest of the reward? Additional payment for joining us on such short notice.”

“R-Really? Ninety percent of the reward, all for me?”

“Sure. It should fetch a hefty sum too. The dungeon proved more dangerous than we initially expected, so it’s fair to add a little extra,” Elsa said.

“That’s true. I agree,” added Yuu.

“Oh! I don’t regret tagging along at all!” exclaimed Tida. “Dear members of Path of Light! Are any of you hurt? I can heal you! You’ll need to be in top condition to carry everything back to the guild!”

Tida cheerfully healed the wounded.

She truly only ever thinks about money.

On the morning of the following day, we bade farewell to the members of Path of Light and started walking through the forest. We encountered monsters a few times but drove them away. As we walked, we discussed the information we'd gotten from the people of Path of Light.

"Something *is* off," noted Elsa.

"Indeed," I said. "I wonder what the cause could be."

According to the adventurers we'd met, there seemed to be more monsters than usual inside the dungeon. In addition, the appearance of a cyclops, a powerful monster never seen before in this location, caught my attention. I did not know what this all meant or how these two facts connected.

"It's hard to tell."

"Oh no! We're under attack!" shouted Tida.

"Army monkeys! We're surrounded!"

"There are too many trees around us! Let's move to a more open area! Yuu, Tida, you two take the front! I'll protect our rear! Ellie, you assist whoever needs it!"

Army monkeys worked together to attack their prey. While they were relatively weak individually, a troop of monkeys had better coordination—worthy of an experienced army—and could outdo veteran adventurers.

We fell into position at Elsa's order and ran without breaking formation.

"Out of my way!" bellowed Yuu, tearing the monkey that had jumped at her with her knife.

"Move!" yelled Tida, smashing her staff into another and shattering its thin bones.

"Ice Hammer!" I chanted.

My Ice Hammer crushed two monsters trying to sneak up on Tida from her blind spot.

"We're almost there!" said Elsa.

We ran toward the clearing while Elsa fought off the monkeys that pursued us. Once there, we turned our backs toward each other and faced the monsters surrounding us.

"There are quite a lot of them," I said.

"The largest troops of army monkeys never exceed fifteen monsters usually..." said Yuu, confused.

“Huh?” faltered Tida. “Including the ones we’ve killed already, there were at least thirty of them!”

“At the very least, we can avoid them jumping down at us from the trees here,” said Elsa. “Let’s get rid of them and keep moving!”

And so, we fought more and more monsters as we advanced.

◇

We exited the forest area and went down yet another flight of stairs. On this new floor, we found a narrow path that surrounded a large circular underground lake. There were no monsters in sight, but there were no stairs either.

Elsa took out her map and checked it once more.

“The stairway to the next floor...is underwater.”

At her words, we all turned to look at the glimmering surface of the lake.

“Seriously? We’ve gotta dive?” complained Tida.

“There’s no way around it,” I said.

“Thankfully, I can’t see any monsters in the—”

A column of water suddenly erupted, cutting off Yuu halfway through her sentence. It was the doing of a gigantic crocodile with a circumference of at least three meters. I’d never seen a monster like this, although I assumed it was an underwater species.

“Never mind...” said Yuu, sighing.

“So there are monsters here,” I noted.

“It’s big. Some sort of dragon, perhaps?” mused Elsa, studying the monster.

“I-It’s coming!”

The gigantic crocodile was far more nimble than its large build suggested, and it lunged at us, using its large, thick tail to attack.

“Not so fast,” said Yuu.

She swung her battle-axe, cutting it off in one swift motion.

The crocodile writhed in pain and flailed into the walls, causing pebbles to break free from the ceiling and collapse on us.

“Hey! Try to rein it in!” exclaimed Elsa.

“Jeez!” whined Tida, taking matters into her own hands and leaping.

As the crocodile looked up at her, she brought down her iron staff onto its head. Once the crocodile’s head hit the ground, the

dull sound of bones shattering filled the air.

"Wow! Its scales are so hard!"

The monster groaned and opened its mouth, angling it at Tida, who was falling back down.

Wait! Could it be trying to...?!

It started concentrating mana into its mouth, turning it into water.

"It's going to use Water Breath!" I warned.

"I'll handle it!" spat Elsa, slashing at the monster's mouth with all her strength.

The crocodile couldn't help but close it, and the spell burst inside. Steam rose from the corners of its mouth. I closed the distance that separated us while it became disorientated, then delivered a precise swing to its neck. It was too thick for me to behead it in one blow, but I cut deep enough to wound it fatally.

We regrouped in front of the monster's corpse and stopped to discuss the state of the dungeon.

"It's strange," said Yuu. "According to our information, only inoffensive fish should be inside this lake. Where did this monster come from?"

"The cyclops was also an anomaly," agreed Elsa. "Is the dungeon changing?"

"I'm glad to hear you two confirm it," I said. "I've never even seen a monster like this one."

"It's most likely some sort of dragon," answered Yuu. "Although I've never seen one like that. A mutant, maybe?"

"Wasn't it just an alligator drake?" said Tida.

"You know what it was?"

"There are monsters like that in some parts of the Southern and Western Continents," explained Tida. "They're a subspecies of dragon. One of them showing up on the Central Continent is a first, though."

"Did the dungeon create it too?" asked Yuu.

"I couldn't say, but one thing is certain. We can't just dive into the water unprepared."

"What do we do, then? We won't be able to get to the next floor if we don't."

"Well... The safest way to handle this would be to take our time investigating and eliminate every single monster first. But we don't have this time. I'll use magic to create an air bubble around us so

we can advance as fast as possible while keeping our guard up," I suggested.

"Understood."

"I'm fine with that."

"Same here!"

I stored the corpse of the alligator drake inside my Grimoire of Mammon and created a large air bubble. After I double-checked the exact location of the next staircase, the four of us entered the lake.

Once inside, we noticed it was fairly deep, and we used a sturdy chain that some adventurers had likely installed in the past to descend faster. My air bubble kept the water away, so we simply walked along the bottom. The clear water allowed us a decent view, including the massive monster swimming in the distance. We minimized our mana usage and maneuvered under the shadow of some large rocks to evade detection. Before long, we got to the next staircase—or to what looked like a hole.

"Let's go."

"Yes."

Elsa jumped into the hole first, then Yuu. I followed suit without hesitation and heard Tida yell, "Wait for me!"

I felt like I was on a slide. Eventually, I ended up in a river that flowed from a rocky area into a grassy field.

When I quickly got onto the shore, I cast a spell to dry my clothes. Elsa and Yuu were already there, and I dried their clothes before doing the same for Tida after she came down the slide screaming.

◆

In the royal castle of Haldoria, Roselia had received a report. Her mood couldn't have been worse: Friede had once again left a mess for her to clean up.

"And where was the money from?" inquired Roselia.

"He appears to have obtained the funds by writing introduction letters," said her subordinate.

"Is that right?"

In high society, it was common to write introduction letters. While it was far from commendable, some took the practice one step further by writing them for people they barely knew for a fee. These letters carried little weight as a person could use them to

make themselves known. The writer did not usually take responsibility for the people they recommended, so it was not a major issue.

"What shall we do, my lady?"

"Let him be. I don't have time to deal with that idiot," said Roselia as she sighed deeply.

A few days prior, monsters had escaped from a dungeon on the border between the Kingdom of Haldoria and one of its vassal countries. Much damage had occurred, and the king and the prime minister were dealing with the aftermath of the monster attack. That meant many of their usual responsibilities fell onto Friede, or in other words, Roselia.

"I don't care much for a prince selling off introduction letters like some petty baron, but I'm busy enough."

Roselia dealt with Friede by assigning a few people to watch over him and ensure he did nothing too stupid. Other than that, she left him alone because she had far more important matters to handle.

"We need to put together a plan of action in case the epidemic that appeared in the imperial capital infects our citizens," added Roselia.

"You're right, my lady," said her subordinate. "I shall contact our ambassador in the empire. In the meantime, let us observe the situation closely."

Roselia nodded before reaching out for the next document on her desk.

◇

The soft pitter-patter of the water droplets falling from the ceiling echoed around us as we walked through a humid stone passage. We'd seen several environments in this dungeon: caverns, forests, underground lakes, and grassy fields... From the thirteenth floor onward, the scenery changed dramatically again, leaving us walking through endless stone corridors.

Four days had passed since we'd entered the dungeon. The deeper we dived, the more often we fought monsters. While it increasingly became apparent that something was off, the four of us advanced according to our original plan.

"Hmm?"

We suddenly heard footsteps ahead of us. Then, we looked at each other and created some distance between ourselves so that we all had enough room to fight if necessary before stopping. After a few moments of tense wait, a group of men—they seemed to be adventurers—appeared.

"Oh, fellow adventurers?" one of them asked. "Are you headed down?"

"Yes," said Elsa. "On our way to the sixteenth floor."

"You should give it up for the time being," replied the man. "The undead have overrun the next floor. There are even a bunch of powerful ones that usually rarely appear, like wraiths and dullahans. We also had to interrupt our hunt. We're on our way back, and I suggest you follow us back up for today."

"I see. We're here on urgent business, though," stated Elsa.

"Urgent business? On the sixteenth floor? Why's that— No, sorry. I shouldn't pry. Forget I asked."

"It's all good. Thanks for the warning."

We waved them goodbye as we passed each other and continued forward.

"So the undead are finally showing up from the next floor onward, huh?" said Tida.

"It seems like it," I answered. "We can deal with the living dead and skeletons, but we'll count on you for the wraiths and ghosts."

"Leave it to me! I've got the Lord's divine protection on my side, so getting rid of evil spirits will be a walk in the park! I can already picture the wraiths begging for their lives when faced with my holy magic!" she exclaimed, cackling.

"EEEEEK!!! D-D-Don't kill me!!!" squealed Tida with teary eyes.

Her screams echoed in the dimly lit corridor.

"Keep it together, Tida! Come on! You need to use Purification!" shouted Elsa.

"Nooo! More of them keep popping up!"

"Tida!" I shouted. "Hurry up or they'll catch up!"

A large group of wraiths was coming after us, their resentful voices cursing us as we ran as fast as we could.

Wraiths were monsters that were originally souls tied to this world by their deep-seated grudges or regrets. Since they were spirits, physical attacks were useless against them. If they so much as grazed us, they'd suck away our life force, making them difficult

foes to handle. The only way to fight them was with magic—light magic, preferably.

A spell Tida could use, Purification, was especially effective against wraiths and other undead without physical bodies. One hit was enough to destroy them.

"O God, please have mercy on these pitiful souls bound by the chains of regret! Purification!" she chanted.

Light flooded the corridor, melting away the wraiths. Mere seconds later, more wraiths appeared to fill the gap left by the others.

"Wh-What's going on? There are way too many of them!" exclaimed Yuu.

"Not even the four of us can handle that many wraiths at once," I agreed.

"Just run for now!" yelled Elsa. "And Tida, use Purification again!"

"Dullahan ahead!" alerted Yuu.

"Don't stop! Keep moving!" Elsa said.

We killed the mounted headless knight without letting our speed drop so that the wraiths wouldn't catch up. They chased us as we destroyed the undead monsters that came at us from the front. Our group kept going, somehow maintaining the status quo, until we turned a corner.

"A dead end!"

"Behind! The wraiths are catching up!"

"We have no choice but to fight them!"

"Argh... I guess I have no choice... Buy me some time!" exclaimed Tida, taking a step back.

And so, we formed a human wall in front of her. I didn't know what she was planning, but we had no choice but to trust her.

I imbued my blade with mana and cut through as many wraiths as possible. My attacks weren't all that effective, but weapons charged with mana could still hurt them. Still, there were far too many of them.

Yuu and Elsa had adopted the same strategy. They were resisting as best as they could, though the sheer number of enemies gradually pushed us back.

At this time, Tida frantically drew a magic circle on the ground with her staff and sprayed holy water all over it.

"Protect us from the wicked! Sanctuary!" she chanted as soon as

she was done.

A ring of light spread out around us, pushing the wraiths away.

"A barrier?" asked Elsa.

"You saved us here," said Yuu.

"We can finally catch our breath," I agreed.

We gathered near the magic circle, the center of the barrier. Tida's barrier had a roughly five-meter radius and, by the looks of it, prevented all undead from entering.

"So...what's our next step?" asked Tida with a sigh, looking at the large crowd of wraiths and skeletons waiting outside the barrier.

"We're going to need a plan of action," I said. "Tida, how long can your barrier last?"

"Usually, half an hour. But I'm drained, so I'd say no more than fifteen minutes."

"Miss Elsa, how far are we from the stairway to the fifteenth floor?" asked Yuu.

"Let me check," responded Elsa, taking out the map and tracing our path with her finger. She pointed to a spot. "This is where we are. We need to go this way, and then...there is our goal, right past this hall."

"It's fairly close," noted Yuu.

"Breaking through the encirclement and running to the stairs seems wiser than trying to annihilate the undead," I said.

"Agreed. With some time to cast, I can use a powerful spell and get rid of the ones blocking our way in one go. Let's use this opportunity to run," declared Tida.

We now knew how to proceed. Before moving, Yuu, Elsa, and I used this time to eat a light meal, drink some water, and prepare our weapons. Needless to say, the undead's presence hardly allowed us to relax.

During this entire time, Tida was kneeling at the very center of the barrier, with her hands joined in prayer in front of her chest.

"The barrier's cracking," cautioned Elsa.

Tida chanted, "O God, may your benevolence—"

"It won't hold for much longer," said Yuu.

"—lead these lost souls where they belong."

"It's coming down!" I exclaimed.

"Let this cold world bask in your glory and bring joy to those who drown in sorrow and your dutiful messengers. Let there be

light... Banish!"

Right as the barrier collapsed, a light—so bright that my eyes should have burned—burst from Tida. Strangely enough, that wasn't the case, and I could see just fine. Tranquility and quiet took over, then I noticed that the pack of undead had vanished without a trace when the light disappeared.

"All righty! I did it! I always knew I could. I mean, I'm amazing like that!" she boasted.

"Run!" exclaimed Elsa, pulling Tida along.

We'd only just taken off when more wraiths appeared out of nowhere to chase us.

"Again?!" squealed Tida.

"Ignore them! We're almost there!"

"I can see the hall!" I said.

We rushed at full speed into the hall, which was nothing like the narrow corridors we'd been traveling through. Columns that rose to the ceiling decorated the fine, spacious hall. There was one issue, though. More undead monsters, including headless knights and the fearful dullahans, were waiting for us.

"Not good! They're gonna catch us!"

"Sometimes you've got to take the plunge!" remarked Tida, suddenly stopping in her tracks to face the crowd of undead.

"Tida?!"

"Keep running! Leave them to me!"

"All right!"

"Thank you!"

"We're counting on you, Tida!"

"Huh? Why did you agree so easily?! You're supposed to say 'We can't let you hog all the fun' and stay with me!"

But we kept running, entrusting this fight to Tida.

As we were about to reach the corridor leading to the stairway, we heard her scream, "You're all so heartless!!!"

"We did say we'd leave it to her. Do you think she'll be okay?" asked Elsa, cutting through the few monsters that stood between us and the stairway.

"I'm sure she will. Miss Tida seems to have plenty of energy to spare," answered Yuu.

"That's not what I meant..."

"I know. But don't worry. I'm sure she's realized that too and went into it with her eyes open."

“You’re right... Let’s believe in her. Oh! There are the stairs!”

We ran down the stairway and reached the fifteenth floor, where we gasped simultaneously. A shiver ran down our spines as we arrived.

“Divine Artifact, Period.”

“Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub.”

“Divine Artifact, Spada della Fenice.”

Mere seconds after we brought forth our respective Divine Artifacts, a monster jumped out of a shadow. Yuu blocked it with her weapon.

Yuu’s Divine Artifact was a battle-axe with a pitch-black edge that seemed to suck in the light. Three colored lines—one golden, one silver, and one red—ran up the grip. The dark edge pressed against a glowing sickle tinged with blue, which was the arm of a two-meter-tall insect monster, a great mantis.

“Monsters like this one have no business showing up in a shallow thirty-floor dungeon!” said Elsa.

According to the guild’s information, only undead monsters were supposed to appear on this floor. Insect monsters being here made no sense! Besides, the great mantis wasn’t the only one. Right behind it were giant worms, sand barges, death scorpios... All powerful foes!

Yuu swung Period, but the great mantis flapped its thin wings and flew back, creating some distance.

“Tida will join us soon. We can’t welcome her like that now, can we?” continued Elsa.

“I agree,” I replied. “Let’s wipe them out.”

“As far as I’m concerned, these are a hundred times easier to handle than wraiths,” added Yuu.

The three of us readied our weapons. We would eradicate this swarm, starting with the great mantis that was raising its sharp sickles at us.

◆

“You’re all so heartless!!!”

Tida’s scream reverberated down the poorly lit hall as she watched Ellie and the others disappear into a narrow corridor.

She sighed. “They really left me behind.”

Wraiths were some of the most powerful undead monsters, and

their ability to suck people's life force was incredibly dangerous. Even a strong, burly man would wither away in seconds.

The monsters extended their limbs in front of them as they rushed toward her, like the tumultuous waters of a tsunami.

"Banish," whispered Tida, unleashing her light attribute spell without chanting.

Holy light filled the hall, and the undead screeched. Not only the wraiths that tried to drag down the living with them but also the living armors that resentful spirits possessed, the impure living dead, and all kinds of undead vanished in the blink of an eye. They left not even a speck of dust.

Peace returned to the hall. For a moment, Tida stood there in silence. There wasn't a hint of her usual joyful persona left on her face.

She glared at a pillar and said, "You there. How about you come out now?"

A few seconds passed before someone walked out of the shadow. The curves gave away that the person was a woman, though she wore a hooded cape and kept her face hidden.

"When did you notice me?" she asked.

"You've been tailing us since the tenth floor. I'm pretty sure the others noticed too."

"Is that right? Looks like I still have a long way to go."

"So? Who are you? You're behind the anomalies in this dungeon, aren't you?"

"Who knows?"

"Oh well," said Tida. "I wasn't expecting you to give me a straight answer. You're a necromancer. A mercenary, I suppose. The only question is, who hired you?"

"I wonder," replied the woman elusively.

Tida sighed and said, "Of course, you wouldn't say. Was it the depraved priest I beat up last month? Oh, or maybe you were a part of that heretical sect I tore down last year!"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Huh? You're not here to kill me because I thwarted your master's evil plans?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but that doesn't matter. If you try to stop me, I'll have your head, Sister."

"Huh?" Tida let out again. She looked at the woman, her eyes widening in confusion. "You're really not after me?"

“I don’t care about you. I just want you out of my way.”

“Ah. Oh... Let’s pretend none of this happened, then. Bye.”

“I’m sorry. However, I cannot afford to send you back alive now that you’ve seen me. I’m sure you understand.”

“Now that’s a problem,” Tida said, her head drooping.

Suddenly, the ground beneath her feet split open, and arms extended to reach her.

“Oh my!” exclaimed Tida, leaping back at once just as the living dead crawled out of the ground.

“You can’t escape me,” said the woman. She shook her arm, and yet another group of wraiths appeared.

“And here they come again. Good grief, that’s why I hate dealing with necromancers...”

“You seem awfully relaxed. You even have time to complain.”

“Well, I *am* relaxed. I have God’s protection. You can throw as many undead monsters as you want my way. They’ll never prevail. You picked the wrong opponent.”

“Kill her!” ordered the woman, ignoring Tida.

The undead rushed at the walking sister all at once, yet Tida did not appear to be worried at all.

“I’m telling you this is pointless. Undead are powerless against me. Banish.”

Tida had used this advanced spell for the third time but did not look tired. Her spell was not weak by any means either, and it once again destroyed all the undead monsters in the room.

That was when Tida noticed something.

“What?!”

Beyond the wall of monsters she’d just vanquished were more enemies. These repulsive beasts had used the undead as cover to approach Tida and pointed their sharp swords and spears at her.

Hobgoblins, she realized.

Unlike goblins, which were roughly the size of a human child, hobgoblins were as tall as adult men and were born with a muscular physique. Moreover, this herd of hobgoblins wasn’t holding plundered weapons like most of their kind and goblins. They held pristine weapons and stood in formation while covering each other’s blind spots. These monsters had training.

The monsters’ blades pierced through Tida’s garment and into her flesh. Blood splattered as a puddle formed under Tida’s feet.

“Argh... Y-You’re not...a necromancer... Ah... Are you...a

monster tamer...?"

"Indeed. Well, technically, I am both a necromancer *and* a monster tamer. I'm Scorpion, the Puppeteer," the woman introduced herself, letting her hood fall.

The young woman had tanned skin, golden eyes, and loose black curls.

"Goodbye, nameless sister," said Scorpion, turning her back to Tida and walking off toward the corridor Ellie and the others had passed through earlier.

Suddenly, a sharp sound cut through the silence.

"My name's Tida."

"Huh?"

"I'm Tildania Nautilus, affiliated with the Grand Sanctuary of the Church of Ibris. Feel free to call me Tida, though."

Scorpion immediately turned around to witness how countless blades had impaled Tida. There was no way she could still talk so casually... So how?

She tried to get a glimpse of Tida through the herd of hobgoblins. When she locked eyes with Tida, the hobgoblins suddenly collapsed. No, that wasn't perfectly accurate. Only the upper halves of their bodies hit the ground. A sword had neatly cut the monsters in half—

No, not a sword, deliberated the woman. *A scythe.*

Even though Tida's clothes appeared torn and an ocean of blood lay at her feet, her skin was unmarred. She held a gigantic, pure white scythe.

"Divine Artifact, Harvest."

She spun her scythe a few times before letting it rest against her shoulder.

Tida quickly sensed and observed Scorpion's surprised expression at her Divine Artifact. The hobgoblins' weapons had pierced her skin, and Scorpion was sure of it. While the traces of the attack remained on her clothes, she wasn't wounded. Tida had an affinity for healing magic. Scorpion concluded Tida's Divine Artifact must have a healing effect.

Thus, Scorpion brought her fingers to her mouth and whistled. The hobgoblins hiding behind the numerous pillars of the hall heeded her call, forming a line between her and Tida. She snapped her fingers, then the living dead and skeletons crawled out of the ground. Ghosts and wraiths slipped through the wall and ceiling to

have the hall bursting with monsters.

"You may be able to heal yourself and use light magic, but you'll never get through that many monsters."

"Who knows? I'll have to try to find out," asserted Tida, shrugging.

Now, Tida faced an army large enough to take over a small city in a single night but did so with a bold smile. Scorpion looked at her like she was insane before waving her hand and sending the army of monsters. The undead led the assault.

Tida's mischievous smile disappeared in favor of a brutal, ferocious grin. She spun her scythe around, swinging it from the sides and above, one blow after another. Every undead she touched vanished on the spot. As for the hobgoblins, she cut right through their defensive gear, splitting their bodies open.

Her speed and power apparently increased with every new monster she killed, her scythe becoming sharper and sharper. On the other hand, every wound inflicted on her healed instantaneously.

"How can that be?" Scorpion let out, astonished.

The Puppeteer called forth more undead, but Tida destroyed them with a single spell. All the while, Tida was still spinning her scythe and hadn't decreased her speed. She cut through the monsters even quicker than before and started approaching Scorpion.

Tida's Divine Artifact—the blade that reaped God's blessings, Harvest—could absorb the mana of any being it cut. She could then use this mana to heal or strengthen herself. Scorpion's strategy of trying to crush her enemy with numbers was fundamentally useless against her.

Scorpion finally realized she couldn't stop Tida and took a scroll from her inner pocket. At this sight, Tida charged in, mowing down the monsters in her path as she closed the distance that separated them.

"I won't let you go!" screamed Tida, swinging her large scythe from bottom to top.

"Urgh!" moaned Scorpion in pain as her blood gushed forth and her arm hit the ground. Her fingers were still closed around the scroll. She reached for the scroll with her other hand and pulled it out of her own grasp and said, "Gate."

Tida slashed at Scorpion but a halo of light soon replaced her. Scorpion had teleported away, but she felt as though her blade had encountered some resistance.

"She got away... I did well, though, didn't I?" said Tida, resting

her scythe against her shoulder and looking down at the severed arm and puddle of blood Scorpion had left behind.

◇

The large scythe came down on me, but Yuu blocked it with her Divine Artifact and pushed it back. I took advantage of this opportunity and imbued mana into my Grimoire of Beelzebub before chanting, “Fire Lance. Thunder Rain. Light Slash.”

Crimson flames took the form of a spear and pierced through the robust carapaces of the insect monsters, burning them from the inside. Thunder befell the pack of werewolves that had approached us while a large blade of light cut through the ranks of the giant orcs.

Elsa had taken position behind me and grappled with a group of awfully well-equipped kobolds. She delved into the horde and lowered her center of gravity before spinning on one of her legs, rotating her blade, and slicing most of the kobolds into two halves in one go.

Yuu let out a battle cry as she swung Period sharply, cutting off the great mantis’s right sickle to quickly deliver a few more hits and kill it.

Elsa, whose blade was dripping with blood and gore, retreated to my side.

“Something is definitely wrong,” I said.

“Yeah. They’re too coordinated. Monsters of different species never cooperate so intricately.”

“I suppose this must be the doing of the person who’s been tailing us since the tenth floor,” I mused.

“That’s likely,” agreed Elsa. “They must be a monster tamer. Let’s hope Tida took care of them.”

“Miss Ellie! Miss Elsa! There’s one heading your way!” Yuu warned us.

We turned to look in Yuu’s direction and saw a tiger with metallic armor sprinting toward us.

“An iron tiger, huh? Those are always a pain to kill,” said Elsa, sighing.

“Elsa, could you distract it for a moment?” I asked.

“Sure thing.”

Elsa stepped forward while I switched grimoires, trading my

Grimoire of Beelzebub for another.

"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Mammon."

I swiftly turned the pages until I found what I was looking for: Flügel. Then I took Elsa's place and slashed at the iron tiger, turning it into mincemeat. While these monsters' iron defenses were robust, they were nothing against Flügel's sharp blade.

"That sword of yours is as scary as always," Elsa commented.

I shrugged and answered, "Sharp but hard to handle. It's not the best weapon for adventu— Huh?"

Suddenly, I felt a wave of mana so intense that my skin tingled. Elsa and I leaped back at once. We'd only just gotten away when that area exploded, a thunderous roar rocking the air. Earth and sand flew around before raining back down, each pebble hitting the ground noisily.

Gazing at the formed crater, I beheld a creature resembling a dragon. It had red scales, sturdy legs with sharp claws, and a thick tail. This creature seemed to be a fire drake, but something was off. Here and there, its body had peculiar bumps that looked like glowing crystals.

"It looks like a fire drake, but what are those crystals?" asked Elsa, pointing her sword at the monster warily.

Yuu had just finished destroying a group of monsters, and she came running up to us.

I observed the fire drake and couldn't shake off a strong sense of discomfort.

"How...disturbing," I let out.

The mana that surrounded the fire drake and that it emitted from its body parts was somehow different and unnatural. Each body part clashed with the others, creating a bizarre atmosphere.

"A mutant?" suggested Yuu.

"I suppose so," I answered. "It clearly evolved from a fire drake, though I cannot fathom how a mutant as warped as this one could have remained alive long enough to mature to this point."

Mutants that were that abnormal usually died right after birth, making it nearly impossible for them to survive. I highly doubted this thing had been born inside this dungeon so I wondered: had the person who'd messed with the dungeon brought it along?

The fire drake seemed confused by its distorted mana. It was not trying to cooperate with the other monsters, instead attacking anything it could reach indiscriminately. After it trampled on a

desert viper aiming for Yuu, it bit a rock bison dashing toward Elsa to death. Shortly after, the fire drake focused on me, opening its mouth and gathering mana.

"He's gonna use Fire Breath!" Elsa screamed to warn me.

I immediately used magic to shield myself.

"Ice Wall."

A thick frozen wall erupted between me and the monster. The next second, an earth-shattering roar echoed through the dungeon as the monster's Fire Breath collided with my wall. The fire mana contained in the spell was so powerful that my Ice Wall started melting.

"Behind me, Ellie!" shouted Elsa.

I switched positions with her. As the wall shattered, made fragile by the fire, Elsa brought down her Spada della Fenice onto the Fire Breath, cutting it in half.

Cutting through concentrated mana as she had was beyond impressive. Elsa had more than earned her rank and nickname.

As soon as the monster's magic relented, Elsa stepped forward. Once the monster was within reach, she swung her blade at one of its legs, leaving a shallow wound.

"Urgh! Its scales are so hard!"

"Ice Lance," I chanted, striking as soon as Elsa moved back.

My spell did not go through the sturdy scales, but it was a good enough distraction. Yuu took advantage of it to sneak into the fire drake's blind spot. She stomped her right foot and rotated her body, letting the centrifugal force give momentum to her jet-black axe before plunging it into the monster's leg.

I couldn't say whether she'd gained more momentum than I'd expected or if it was due to the powers of her Divine Artifact. But she tore through the scales *and* sent the monster flying backward, crashing into the dungeon's wall.

"And here I hoped to cut off its leg..." she complained. "It's a lot sturdier than a regular fire drake."

"That it is. And look," said Elsa, pointing at the monster with her chin. Blood had already stopped flowing from the wound she'd inflicted earlier.

"The creature's regenerative abilities are beyond impressive," I said.

"It's going to be hard to handle," replied Elsa.

The monster was starting to recover from Yuu's last attack. It

faced us again, emitting mana from every crystal on its body.

"What's happening?"

"I'm not sure, but we should put some distance between it and us," I said.

The action was unlike anything a regular fire drake would have done, and we moved back, warily observing the situation. The mana that had seeped out of the crystals condensed itself before catching fire and pouring toward us in waves.

I sent Ice Thorns at the waves of fire, yet it barely slowed them down. And so, I shielded my body with a thick layer of mana before jumping in. Elsa and Yuu did the same, protecting themselves before letting the waves of fire pass them. The few monsters left could not imitate us, and flames burned them to a crisp. A quick look at their carbonized remains made me suspect something more about these flames.

"These crystals' flames are quite something," Elsa said.

"Fire mana can accelerate combustion," explained Yuu. "Flames reinforced with enough mana can reduce beings to ashes in a matter of seconds."

"It needs time to unleash its breath or its waves of fire," I noted. "I'll stop its movements, so let's attack it all at once! Ice Prison!"

A chill ran down the ground from where I stood to the fire drake, and ice erupted at its feet, trapping it.

Elsa ran past me and started slashing at the monster repeatedly, focusing on the places where its scales were thinnest at the joints. As for Yuu, she brandished her large battle-axe, Period, and gathered mana into the edge. The condensed mana started glowing. I couldn't believe she could wield that much mana while maintaining her Divine Artifact.

"Dark Laceration," she exclaimed, bringing her axe down on the monster.

The edge of her axe left a trail of dark light as it shattered the scales and crystals covering the monster's body alike. Yuu opened up a large gash spanning from the fire drake's torso to one of its hind legs. While Elsa tried to plunge her blade into the gaping wound, the monster let out a powerful groan before rotating its body and waving its tail around. A direct hit from that thick, sturdy tail would be enough to turn a grown man into mincemeat.

Elsa's sword emitted a pale glow. Her Divine Artifact made her as strong as the desperate situation she faced, then she swung it and

cut off the dangerous tail with one stroke of her sword. Without its tail, the monster lost its balance and crashed down, unable to support itself on its wounded leg.

After their respective attacks, both adventurers took a step back, and I closed to deliver the coup de grâce with Flügel. The thin, sharp blade cut through the scales and crystals into the monster's flesh.

I was about to complete my swing when a strange impact took me aback.

"What?!"

Flügel's blade was shattering.

I hadn't been able to cut through. But why? I didn't get it. My motion had been perfect! Was there truly something that not even Flügel could cut?!

"Ellie!"

"Miss Ellie!"

It hadn't been for long, but I'd lost my cool for a moment. Elsa and Yuu's voices brought me back to my senses, and I saw the monster's mouth wide open right before me.

I gasped.

I concentrated the mana in my arms in a hurry to attempt to protect myself as well as possible. The surrounding air trembled as the monster unleashed its Fire Breath. I gritted my teeth and braced for the pain, but Elsa jumped in front of me before the attack could reach me. Even as the heat burned her skin, the effect of her Divine Artifact boosted her defensive abilities and allowed her to endure the fire.

"Elsa!" I screamed.

"Retreat, Ellie!" she shouted back.

I moved away from the fire. In the meantime, Yuu went around the monster and dug her axe into its chin from the bottom up to stop it. Finally, the fire died down.

"Heal!" I immediately cast after materializing my Grimoire of Beelzebub. Without missing a beat, I rapidly used two upper-grade spells. "Light Pillar! Storm Slash!"

The pillar of light pierced through the drake as countless blades of wind tore through its scales, making the monster roar.

I succeeded in injuring it, although the blood swiftly stopped flowing. The wounds Yuu and Elsa had inflicted on it earlier had already healed, and crystals filled up the gashes.

“Elsa, Yuu, could the two of you buy me some time?”

“Do you have an idea?” asked Yuu.

“I’ll finish with a high-level spell in one go,” I responded.

To get the most power out of a high-level spell, I needed to recite the entire incantation. I explained that to the duo, and Elsa nodded.

“Got it,” she said. “Ready, Yuu?”

“Yes!”

I left the drake to them and focused on preparing my spell. The monster tried to attack with flames that had soared from its crystals to stop me, but Elsa and Yuu covered me. I’d commanded troops and fought with some of my subordinates, including Mireille. Still, I thought fighting alongside comrades I didn’t need to lead was nice.

The corners of my lips lifted as I started chanting, “O white fortress of the frozen lands, let the lamentations of your prisoners disappear into the white sea. Let even nostalgia turn into nothingness, and stagnation and nihility rule over this miniature garden forevermore. Niflheim!”

This spell did not make the temperature fall or throw the cold air at the enemy to freeze it. Instead, it focused on isolating the area around the target and freezing it entirely, leaving the target no escape. Even though the fire drake could use strong fire magic, it started freezing over. The cold seeped inside its body through the wounds Elsa and Yuu had just inflicted. After a few seconds, the creature had frozen to the bone.

"Statue Breaker."

My following spell allowed me to shatter any ice structure. Even if the drake was likely already dead, one couldn't be too careful with a mutant like that. The frozen fire drake broke into pieces with loud cracking noises.

I fell to my knees.

"Ellie!"

"I'm okay," I said. "I just used too much mana at once. I'll be fine after a bit of rest. What about you, Elsa? Its breath hit you."

"My Divine Artifact improves my recovery rate. Besides, you healed me. So I'm pretty much as good as new."

At the time, I'd only had the leeway to cast a low-level spell, Heal. Thankfully, it had been enough.

After a few deep breaths, I started feeling less dizzy. I took Elsa's hand and stood up, then I suddenly heard Yuu mutter, "Hmm... What's up with that?"

Elsa and I turned to follow her line of sight and noticed a sphere among the ice shards. It seemed to be made of the same material as the crystals on the fire drake. While high-level spells had definitely frozen and shattered the monster simultaneously, the sphere had not cracked.

Did Flügel break because it hit this sphere? I wondered.

More than the existence of that crystal, what truly shocked us was what we could see inside it.

"A-A little girl?"

Within the sphere was a small girl with her arms clasped around her knees. She appeared to be about ten—a little younger than Lunoa when I'd first met her.

"What in the world?" whispered Elsa.

Suddenly, cracking sounds echoed. Fissures around the sphere spread and widened until the crystal shattered with a surprisingly

quiet noise. The crystal shards disappeared as if melting into the air, and the young girl lay on the ground.

Elsa and Yuu swallowed an anxious breath as I walked over carefully and helped the girl sit up. The girl's body was warm, and her chest fell and rose with every breath she took. She was alive. I took off my robe and covered her naked body. I pushed her blonde locks—so shiny that they almost appeared to glow—away from her face. Considering her age, she looked more adorable than beautiful, but she had delicate, well-proportioned features.

"Hmm?" the little girl mumbled, slowly stirring and opening her eyes.

My first thought was that they were gorgeous. Her right eye was red like the setting sun, and her left eye was as blue as a bright summer's day.

"Is this sort of thing common in dungeons?" I asked.

"Obviously not," responded Elsa, her tone deadpan.

"Then who is this girl?"

The little girl tilted her head and looked at each of us intently before making eye contact with me.

"Mama?" she whispered.

Before we could question her, she closed her eyes and fell asleep again.

"Wh-What do we do?" asked Elsa.

"Well, we certainly cannot leave her here," I answered.

Abandoning a child in a dungeon was out of the question, so I wrapped her in my robes and picked her up.

We walked away from the monster corpses and found a spot to rest.

The girl had yet to wake up, which was a little worrying. Yuu had examined her and assured us she was simply sleeping, and nothing seemed wrong with her body.

We'd just lit a fire so she wouldn't be cold when Tida caught up to us.

"You wouldn't believe what a tough time I had!" whined Tida as soon as she arrived. Her eyes fell on the girl, and she exclaimed, "Hang on, where did that child come from?!"

I shrugged and answered, "It's a long story... Well, not so long. But we also have no idea how she got here."

We told Tida about the strange circumstances in which the girl

had appeared.

"So you're telling me a child came out of a monster's corpse?" Tida summarized, half convinced. "Is that even possible?!"

"I'd normally agree that it makes no sense, but it happened. Right in front of our eyes," insisted Elsa.

"The world is big," Yuu said. "And there are countless things that surpass our understanding."

The two adventurers accepted this mysterious phenomenon very quickly.

While I wanted to know how that could have happened, we had far more pressing matters. We all agreed to worry about this later.

Tida then told us about what had happened on her side. She dramatically gestured as she recounted her accomplishment.

"And so, I fought through the horde of enemies this Scorpion lady had summoned. I tirelessly stood up to adversity, again and again, until—"

"You let her get away."

"Th-That's one way of putting it. Still, I cut off one of her arms. I'm pretty sure I wounded her further right before she teleported, so it's my win."

"It's fine. So she used a scroll, huh?"

"The mercenaries also used teleportation scrolls during the Sarjas conflict," noted Elsa.

"Indeed. The necromancer who brought the monster with the crystallized child trapped inside it to this dungeon and the mysterious mercenaries that appeared in Sarjas all used teleportation scrolls. Those are incredibly rare, so I doubt it could be a coincidence," I said.

From the looks of it, Scorpion hadn't just brought dangerous monsters into this dungeon. She was most likely responsible for the king poison slime in the capital too. If she was also involved with the mercenaries that operated behind the scenes during the war... What could their goal be? Terrorism? Creating a diversion?

I had to look into this matter more closely after returning to the capital. Even if I did not know what they were trying to accomplish, plenty of people had died because of their machinations. I wouldn't let them go scot-free when they'd hurt Mireille and the others. *I'll need to start a serious investigation.*

And so I drank the mana recovery potion Yuu handed me. Once I'd recovered to some extent, we got back up and headed toward

our goal. The young girl was still sleeping, so I carried her on my back while Yuu and Tida guarded me from the sides.

"Ellie, we're almost there," said Elsa, pulling me out of my thoughts.

What was I doing? We were still in the middle of a dungeon—a dangerous place that could become my grave if I didn't stay alert! I refocused on the task at hand, then a rock wall soon came into sight.

"There it is! That's the emaya vein!"

Unsurprisingly, most of the emaya ore had been left untouched. This material couldn't sell for a lot, making the hardship of carrying some out of the dungeon unappealing.

"Miss Elsa and I will do the mining," said Yuu. "Miss Ellie, please watch over the child. And Miss Tida, please secure the perimeter."

"All right," I said.

"You got it!" Tida chirped.

To ensure no monster would surprise Yuu and Elsa while they took out pickaxes and started mining, Tida and I moved back and kept watch on the tunnel entrance that led to the emaya ore. Not a single monster appeared for the next hour; it might have been because Tida had gotten rid of the monster tamer for us. Eventually, Yuu and Elsa called for me to venture into the deepest part of the tunnel, where I found a pile of emaya ore several times taller than me. As expected of two Rank A adventurers, they had mined so much ore and were not even out of breath.

"This should be more than enough."

"The rest is in your hands, Ellie."

I left the girl in Tida's care before chanting, "Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Mammon."

Since I hadn't mined the emaya ore, I was worried I couldn't store it. Fortunately, the magic contract we'd established before we left worked wonders, and I put everything into my grimoire.

"Wow. It sure is impressive to look at," said Elsa. "Everything really fits."

"This is such a convenient ability," agreed Yuu. "Mine is remarkably useless outside the battlefield, so I'm a little jealous."

"The earning potential of this thing is boundless..." muttered Tida. "Ah, how I wish I had the same Divine Arti—"

"Come on, let us wrap things up and hurry back home," I said,

cutting her daydreaming short.

I let my grimoire disappear and picked up the child from Tida's arms before we started walking back.

◆

In the Reki Empire's capital, the commoner district was made up of many buildings with roof shingles. Beside one building, a young woman addressed a group of men. At fifteen, the black-haired beauty had only just become an adult. However, most inhabitants of the Southern Continent would have assumed she was older. Her long black hair wasn't unlike that of the Southerners but her sharp, well-defined features and her green eyes betrayed her foreign origins.

"And so, I'm fairly certain that the one who's been embezzling money is none other than Marlen, the head clerk."

"S-Seriously?!"

"I knew it!"

"Well, if what you've told me is true, I cannot think of a more likely suspect."

"Got it! I'll let the authorities know and have them investigate!"

"Thank you, miss! Here's your silver coin, as promised."

"Thanks for your patronage!" said the young woman, slipping the coin into her inside pocket.

"Mistress Adel!"

"Maoran?"

Another young woman stepped out of the shadows right after the men left. She was slightly older than the black-haired beauty—Adel—and seemed nervous as she ran up to her.

"Why do you look so flustered? Is something wrong?" asked Adel.

"Of course I'm flustered! How many times must I tell you not to sneak out?!"

"Sorry, sorry! I can handle myself, though. No need to worry."

"It doesn't matter whether you can or cannot! We all worry nonetheless!"

"I got it, I got it," said Adel, sighing. "You're such a worrywart, Maoran. And stop being so formal when we're outside. You promised you wouldn't."

"If you want me to keep my promise, I need you to do the

same! You must tell me before going out!”

Adel groaned. “It was my bad, sorry...”

Maoran calmed down. Her face, which had turned bright red from anger, started going back to its regular color.

“Good grief...” said Maoran, then she remembered something. “Ah, the merchant ship you were waiting for docked at the harbor.”

“Captain Nguyen’s ship?”

“Yes.”

“Stellar! Let’s go to the harbor!”

“Captain Nguyen!”

“Hmm? Oh! It’s you, girly!”

“Welcome back, Captain! How was your trip?”

“Great! Thanks to your sauerkraut, no one died this time either! I met a merchant on the Central Continent who was blown away by your idea! Oh, and here, I didn’t forget your books.”

“Thank you!”

Adel paid the man and took the books, bidding him farewell and following Maoran back. The two walked briefly before straying away from the busy streets and boarding a carriage that had been waiting for them on Maoran’s orders. She always paid attention to such details.

“You were right about the cause of sailors’ disease, mistress,” said Maoran. “A change in diet was enough to prevent it.”

“Yep. Although, I did little more than read through the papers I found and identify a common factor. The researchers who wrote these studies are the amazing ones!”

While the two talked, the carriage exited the commoner district, passing by the noble district and entering the imperial district. In that place, only the most noble characters of the empire resided. Security was tight, but the carriage had immediate permission to go through and stopped in front of a palace in a corner of the district. The women got out of the carriage and entered the palace without hesitation.

“Adel.”

Adel was walking through a wide corridor with ornate red pillars when a voice stopped her. Few nobles could afford such a privilege. The emperor and the empress certainly could, but she had received this palace as a personal residence, and she struggled to imagine that the emperor would have visited her without notice.

Maoran—her waiting maid, instructor, and friend—was also one of the select few who could behave informally with Adel. But she would never have dared to do so in front of the domestics. Plus, Maoran was walking right next to her and had no reason to stop her. This left one person on Adel's list.

"Greetings, mother," said Adel, turning around to find exactly the person she'd expected to see in front of her—a voluptuous woman with black hair and black eyes.

"You sneaked out of the palace again," her mother remarked.

"Uh..."

"Good grief. She's a handful. Is she not, Maoran?"

"By no means, Mistress Gyokuryou. I apologize for my carelessness..."

Maoran was about to prostrate in front of Gyokuryou, but the mistress stopped her with a wave of her hand.

"There is no need for you to apologize. I know full well how hard you work to stop her. You have my thanks, Maoran."

"I'm not worthy of such praise," Maoran immediately answered.

Adel watched the two interact with an expression of displeasure. She noticed what her mother was holding and tilted her head in confusion.

"What is that, mother?" she asked.

"A letter addressed to you."

"A letter?"

Adel received the envelope with a puzzled look on her face.

◇

"Here is your coffee, miss."

"Thank you, Mireille."

I took the cup of hot coffee from Mireille's hands.

By the time we returned to the capital, the doctors and alchemists had already mobilized to work on the antidote and distribute it as swiftly as possible. A long, detailed investigation revealed to the populace that a mutant king poison slime was behind it all. We had no conclusive evidence, but there was a fairly high chance that the appearance of this monster had resulted from the monster tamer Tida had fought. That part had not been made public, yet imperial authorities who worried the capital could become the target of a terror attack had launched an investigation. I

had also hired a few people to look into things on my side, and I hadn't had much luck.

After we'd exited the dungeon, Tida had elected to remain in Dold. We'd told her that if she returned to the capital with us, the imperial family would surely reward her for her efforts. She'd immediately refused, saying, "No, no, no, no! I can't— Um, I mean, no need for any more rewards. I just did my duty as the Lord's servant! So don't mention me, all right? I wasn't there! Yes, yes, that is how a refined, beautiful, and pious sister such as myself should behave."

Her approach had been suspicious beyond words, yet we'd parted ways at the Adventurers' Guild in Dold. Tida had gotten the money the members of Path of Light had left for us there, and Yuu had gotten her cyclops's eye before we'd returned to the capital.

As for the young girl who had come out of the fire drake, well... From the sound of it, she was running down the corridor in front of my office. Just as I'd expected, my door opened a few seconds later.

"Mama!" exclaimed the small girl with silky blonde hair as she barged into the room and jumped into my arms.

"Alice, you must knock before entering a room," I told her, gently caressing her hair.

"I'm sorry," she apologized happily.

For some reason, she'd started calling me "mama" after waking up outside the dungeon, and she would start crying whenever she was separated from me. After a lot of debating, I'd decided to take her in.

The girl's attachment to me was only part of the reason. So many secrets surrounded her that I didn't feel comfortable entrusting her to others. She'd told me that she didn't have a name, so I'd opted to call her Alice and keep her by my side.

Misha poked her face through the door.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Mama, can I play with Big Sister Misha in the garden?" asked Alice.

"All right. But remember not to go past the gate," I warned. "I'm counting on you, Misha."

"Understood, miss. Let's go, Miss Alice."

"Yes!"

Alice took Misha's hand and happily walked off to the garden.

"The mansion is a lot livelier now," Mireille pointed out.

“That’s true. Well, that is a good thing,” I answered.

Mireille and I idly chatted as I flipped through the pages of my Grimoire of Lucifer. Eventually, I found what I was looking for—an entry from an ancient document I’d once read in Haldoria. It was about the cacao pods we’d seen in the dungeon. The name was familiar, and I had certainly read about it before.

“Are you looking for a way to process that fruit you brought home?”

“Yes. If we dry it, let it ferment, and add sugar and butter, it can become a sweet delicacy.”

“Is that so?”

“According to the recipe, the chef of a noble house of the Old Kingdom has shown this. It appears to have been a very popular treat at the time. People even used it to bake cookies and cakes.”

“That...sounds like a lot of money waiting to be made,” said Mireille.

“Why, indeed. We must experiment first. Send a request to the party called Path of Light through the Adventurers’ Guild of Dold in my name. If they accept it, have them sign a magic contract to swear them to secrecy. Fruits that grow inside dungeons regenerate so fast that I’m not worried about cacao running out. But I don’t want any other firm imitating us before we can complete our own product.”

“Understood, miss. I’ll also look for a tight-lipped cook.”

“I’ll leave that in your hands. While you’re at it, summon some of the merchants who fled the kingdom—those who specialize in teahouses and the like. If we create a new dessert, I’m considering opening a small restaurant specializing in refreshments and sweets.”

“I’ll start making arrangements at once.”

◆

Roselia let out a sigh of relief when she learned from the ambassador that a king poison slime had caused the epidemic in the empire. But soon after, she faced another report that made her grow pale.

She was working when one of her subordinates brought her a pile of tax reports. One of them concerned a large company. They’d paid their taxes for the year, but the amount was far less than that of previous years.

“What happened?!” called out Roselia, surprised. “How could the tax yields drop so much?”

“Is it truly that strange? Their revenue has gone down, sure, but the economic climate changes yearly. Some change is bound to happen,” her subordinate answered.

Reviewing tax reports was not one of the crown prince’s duties. But the king and prime minister were still busy dealing with the aftermath of the monster attack, so this task fell to Roselia. She wasn’t surprised that her subordinate, delving into such matters for the very first time, hadn’t picked up on the problem.

Thus, she explained, “Only small- and medium-sized companies are subject to such factors. A large company should not pay so few taxes... Wait! Could this be—” She stopped herself and gave him a list. “Go to the Merchants’ Guild at once and check their information on these firms.”

“Huh? A-All right.”

Her subordinate was confused, but he hurried out of the room to comply. He returned an hour later, with his face white as a sheet, and handed several documents to Roselia. Most companies on the list appeared to have converted their main offices in the royal capital into branch stores. They’d kept their buildings and activity in the capital but transferred their headquarters abroad. A further look into things taught Roselia that many artisans and alchemists who worked for their firms had also left the country.

“What in the world...? So many companies have relocated their headquarters! Why were we not informed while this was happening?”

“I don’t know... But it seems like a mediator gave them the incentive to leave the kingdom. They were told that they’d only be sold a particularly scarce and precious material if they moved their headquarters out of the country.”

“A scarce material?”

“Aqua silk, my lady.”

“What?!”

Aqua silk was rare, as it could only be found in ancient ruins and dungeons. Roselia immediately understood the appeal for artisans and alchemists alike. Merchants would fight tooth and nail to secure the right to trade this, making potential profits incalculable. Besides, transferring your headquarters from one nation to another wasn’t that big of an ask as far as the firms were

concerned. It just meant that they'd pay the bulk of their taxes to a different government.

"Still," started Roselia after calming down, "I'm surprised that so many firms accepted this offer, knowing full well that it may earn them the kingdom's ire."

Considering the worth of aqua silk, Roselia wouldn't have been surprised to see roughly thirty percent of the companies on the list defect to another nation, even if that meant risking their relationship with the kingdom. What confounded her was that close to eighty percent had taken the plunge. Were none of them risk averse?

"Well, from what I heard, the mediator came to them bearing an introduction letter from the crown prince..."

Roselia gasped.

They'd been outwitted! Letters of introduction carried no official weight, sure, but the firms had not been trying to do anything illegal in this specific case. It was all a matter of principles. Removing their headquarters from the kingdom after years of mutually beneficial relationships usually carried consequences in the form of strenuous relationships. But if they did it with the crown prince's blessing—or at least the perceived blessing—then there were no such worries!

"Find that mediator immediately and buy that stupid prince's letter back! You can pay them up to three times what Friede received from them."

"U-Understood! B-But...what if they refuse to give up the letter even for that price?"

"I don't like doing so, but I suppose we'll have to turn to less savory means," declared Roselia.

"A-As you command..."

Roselia's subordinate paled as he dashed out of the room.

◇

"Miss Ellie," said Mireille, taking a note from a bird's foot and reading it. "Lady Roselia seems to have realized what was happening with the firms of the royal capital."

"Is that so? Then you may sell the letter back to her. Request three times the amount we paid for it."

"Are you sure?"

“If we refuse to settle, she’ll have our mediator killed.”

“Would Lady Roselia truly resort to such methods?” asked Mireille.

“Oh, she will,” I assured her. “There is a world of difference between not *wanting* to do something and being *unable* to do it. Roselia cannot let our mediator continue their work. She’ll bend her principles if she has to.”

“I understand. Then, I shall pass your orders along.”

I watched Mireille write my directive for our agent provocateur in the kingdom as I stood up and started getting ready to go out.

“Yummyyyyyy!!!” effused Tida, shoving more of the small confectioneries into her mouth.

Several sweet treats were lined up on the table: cookies, pancakes, coated dried fruits, and nuts. All of them had been prepared using what the people of the Old Kingdom used to call “chocolate.” This ingredient was both bitter and sweet and offered various applications. There was still much to research, but after a few months of relentless trials, we’d completed the first recipe. It was now at a level where we could turn it into a product and sell it. We’d also acquired a decent stock of cacao pods.

The members of Path of Light had been surprisingly efficient and very tight-lipped, so I officially employed them as Traitre's first exclusive party. Every month, we ordered a relatively large amount of cacao that they sourced for us.

Tida had returned to the capital right in time for me to invite her to a tasting session alongside Alice, Mireille, Lunoa, and Misha.

"It's delicious."

"Sweet and tasty!"

"I'm particularly fond of the chocolate-covered nuts."

"I know. The variations that aren't so sweet are the best."

The response was pretty good.

"This will go amazingly well with some booze," Tida stated.

"You think so?" I asked.

"I'm sure of it! My intuition never fails me! The rich sweetness will match the taste of alcohol!"

"I see... I'll talk to the chef about it."

"When he whips something up, make sure to invite me back, okay?!"

"I shall if he succeeds."

I'd already created a division tasked with creating a teahouse. They were currently working to train employees and acquire a suitable building.

"It looks like we're all set," said Mireille.

"Indeed," I agreed. "We just need to serve this at a tea party to give the nobility a taste. Rumors will do the rest of the work for us."

"I'll make arrangements at once."

"Thank you, Mireille. Please ask the chef to prepare an array of delicacies we may present to the imperial family. Money is no object, so have him use the finest ingredients."

"Yes, miss."

And so Traitre's very first teahouse, Grimoire, opened successfully.

Day after day, the daughters of wealthy merchants and noble ladies in disguise crowded the merchant district that was relatively close to the noble district.

"I'm glad to see the teahouse is doing well."

"That it is, miss," expressed Mireille. "It's all the nobles talk

about!”

◇◆☆◆◇

A red-haired young woman wearing her hair in a ponytail brought her microphone close to her mouth and read, “In those days, the empire had yet to understand the big picture, as much was still shrouded in mystery. However, we can say without doubt this particular event later sparked a chain reaction, dragging many countries into the fray.”

The redhead thrust her left hand forward and struck a pose.

“That’s it for today’s *Real History*! Tune in next week for more!”

The camera zoomed on her face, then the girl winked.

“And cut! That was the last one, Akali, thank you!”

“Thank you!”

“You did amazing today!”

“Thank you very much!”

“I’ll be counting on you next week too.”

“Likewise! See you next week.”

“See you!”

The red-haired girl known as Akali thanked the staff members before walking up to her manager, Marie. Then, the latter handed her her coat, and they returned to the dressing room.

Akali was an up-and-coming newcomer idol hosting a show for the first time, which meant a lot to her. The deal was especially sweet as this show would air on the dukedom’s public broadcasting channel during prime time. She had given everything she had during the recording and had to make this a resounding success! The director’s reaction had been so good that Akali felt confident.

She let out a tired sigh as she entered her dressing room.

“Good work out there, Akali,” said her manager, handing her a cup of tea.

“Thank you, Miss Marie!”

As she received the cup, her stomach growled softly. Akali’s face reddened in shame, but Marie smiled.

“You’ve been filming since dawn, and it’s no wonder you’re so famished. It’s not quite dinnertime but we’ll get you some food on the way back.”

“Can I?!”

“Sure, today’s a special day! We gotta celebrate your successes!

What do you say we stop at Grimoire?"

"Yay! My friends told me that their new chocolate cake is to die for!"

"Is that so?" said Marie with a little laugh. "You'd better change fast, then!"

"Yeeees!"

Akali daydreamed about the famous café's new chocolate cake as she hurriedly changed into her regular clothes.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, new readers. It's been a while, old readers. I'm Hagure Metabo.

Thank you very much for purchasing this second volume of *A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires*.

The previous volume featured quite polarizing developments, so I was worried whether my readers would accept them. Regardless, more people than I expected ended up picking up my work, and I was both surprised and overjoyed.

I also had the opportunity to sign many books through projects my publisher arranged. I must admit I mulled over this a lot. My handwriting is by no means pretty to look at. I especially struggled with the way I wrote the characters for "ha" and "re" in my name. In the end, I decided to go for a stylized version of the characters. Hopefully, that was enough to make my signature look cool.

Moving on to the contents of this volume, Yuuka Kusunoki, the doctor and adventurer, finally started showing up for real in the story. Yuuka is the character I've put the most thought into, as she is none other than the protagonist of the first novel I ever wrote. I'm very attached to her since I've written a Japanese-ish character who wields an axe and is a doctor and an adventurer in every story I've posted online. When I received the first illustration of Yuuka, drawn by masami-sama's hand, it moved me differently than when I saw their rendition of Elizabeth, the main character.

I wrote as much in my previous afterword, but moving on from recounting anecdotes to the acknowledgments is incredibly difficult. I wonder if, one day, I'll become as good as my senior writers at seamlessly transitioning from one topic to the next.

Anyhow, now is the time for some words of thanks.

Once again, I'm incredibly thankful to masami-sama for drawing my characters. The designs of Yuuka, Roselia, and Alice, among others, were wonderful.

I'd also like to thank Oonoimo-sama for writing the manga

version of *Livid Lady*. Elizabeth and the others look amazing, and I look forward to seeing their adventures in manga format every time!

Thank you very much, S-sama, for guiding me through every phone call, even though I'm terrible at social interactions and always panic.

I'm also beyond grateful to everyone who worked hard to bring this manuscript to you. Their dedication was unmatched, and I wouldn't be surprised if they could outshine even the most skilled jugglers with their multitasking abilities.

Finally, I'd like to thank you, my dear readers. Thanks to you, I was able to meet you once again in this second volume.

Thank you very much!

Hagure Metabo

Bonus Short Story

Madame Majrah's Bathing Suit Shop

While in Hammitt County, we had a free day to occupy. I'd initially planned on allowing everyone to take the day off, but the count's wife and daughter had invited us to bathe in the sea. Sea bathing was all the craze in the county these days, and Count Hammitt was tirelessly working to make it popular beyond the borders of his territory.

Our outing with the countess and her daughter was planned for tomorrow, meaning that after wrapping up our work for the day, we had another mission to tackle: procuring clothes fit for bathing in public. These were apparently called "bathing suits."

Although sea bathing was fairly popular on the Northern Continent and eastern islands, it was quite novel here on the Central Continent. I had heard about this recreational pastime but had never partaken in it. In other words, neither my group members nor I owned any swimming gear. Hammitt County thankfully enthusiastically promoted sea bathing just enough that shops that handled such products were easy to find. We headed to one of them to purchase bathing suits.

My group walked through the streets under the setting sun, enjoying the salty sea breeze. There were few people out at this time. The store we were going to, Madame Majrah's Bathing Suit Shop, was relatively close to our lodging, so we arrived quickly.

We entered, and a woman welcomed us with a soft smile. I could see why the countess had recommended this place. The atmosphere in the store resembled that of a high-end tailor.

"Welcome. I'm Madame Majrah, the owner of this shop. May I ask if you were referred here by someone?"

"We were, indeed. Countess Hammitt warmly recommended your shop," I said, handing her the letter of introduction Countess Hammitt had written for us.

Madame Majrah glanced at the letter and politely bowed before

showing us to a drawing room in the back.

"Please wait a moment. I shall bring several bathing suits for you to look at," she said.

An employee came in to serve us some tea while she was gone. Soon, she returned accompanied by several people who carried bathing suits.

"Forgive me for the wait," she said. "If you would please follow me."

She led us to a row of changing rooms, where each of us entered one and tried on the provided bathing suits.

The first one I tried was a blue bikini. I exited the changing room and saw that the others had already changed. Mireille was also wearing a bikini, although hers was red, while Lunoa and Misha wore tankinis.

"My! You all look amazing! Sexy! Cute!" exclaimed Madame Majrah loudly, her earlier refinement gone.

We were slightly taken aback, but her employees seemed used to her antics. They calmly listened to her instructions and checked that our clothes fit.

"I-It's a bit embarrassing," Lunoa said. "I feel like I'm in my underwear..."

"You think so?" asked Misha. "I've swum in light clothes when I lived on the road with my parents, so this doesn't feel all that different."

Madame swiftly approached them as they discussed their impressions.

"You two are A-DO-RA-BLE!" she squealed. "Tell me, how do you like your bathing suits?"

"Well... My tail feels a little uncomfortable," Misha answered.

"I'll have someone bring you one with the tail hole in a different position!"

"C-Could I also get a different one?" requested Lunoa. "One that hides the curves of my body a little more..."

"I know just the thing for you, sweetheart! Frills! You'll be cuter than ever!"

Employees soon rushed back with the items Madame had demanded, then handed Lunoa and Misha new bathing suits to try on.

"Excuse me," Mireille said to an employee standing close to her. "I'd prefer a more muted color if possible."

“You’re not keeping this one?” I asked her.

“No,” she responded, keeping her tone calm and composed as usual. “I believe this color might be slightly too eye-catching for me.”

“Is that so? I think it suits you.”

“A servant should not wear such flashy colors…”

“That is not relevant. Tomorrow is your day off, Mireille.”

“Still… I’d much rather wear my usual maid dress…”

“That is out of the question. It’s not every day we get a chance like this. I want you to enjoy sea bathing too.”

Madame walked up to us while I tried to stop Mireille from giving up on the outing and fleeing.

“I couldn’t agree more!” she exclaimed. “A chic color would be lovely with your hair color. Leave it to me! I shall have another bathing suit prepared for you at once.”

Madame’s rambling delayed Mireille until she let the eager owner convince her to try on another one.

I took another look at my bathing suit. It was far more revealing than anything I was used to wearing, and I felt some embarrassment, though it was nothing I couldn’t handle. Besides, Countess Hammitt had invited us to her private beach. Few people would see us in these outfits, which was fine.

“Oh?” I let out, noticing a garment. “This is nice.”

“Isn’t it just? With a design like this one, you will want a pareu to pair it with. It’ll bring out your sexiness in a simple, classical, yet chic way!”

Even though I wasn’t sure I really understood much of what Madame said, the combination looked fashionable. She was quite persuasive in selling her creations but struck me more as a designer than a merchant. She also seemed to get more excited with every new outfit we tried on.

I smiled awkwardly and extended my hand to receive the bathing suit and pareu she wanted me to try.

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A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 2
by Hagure Metabo

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